

The Gospel of the Kingdom of God

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There is an aspect to the Gospel that is not often mentioned in evangelism or even in scholarly discussions of the Gospel. But I don't want to let it go unmentioned. It is an aspect that, for the most part, is now either overlooked completely or is completely distorted. What I have in mind is the "kingdom" facet of the Gospel.

In Matthew 3:2, we read that John the Baptist preached, "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Because the Jews thought that the kingdom of Israel was the kingdom of God, and because Matthew specifically wrote his Gospel for Jews, Matthew clarified for his readers that this Gospel was not about the nation of Israel by calling the kingdom "the kingdom of heaven.") Although the account of his life is in the New Testament, John the Baptist was really the last of the prophets of the Old Testament (often referred to in the New Testament as the law and prophets—see for example, Matthew 7:12; 22:40; Acts 13:15; and Romans 3:21). Hence, we read in Luke 16:16, "The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it."

The Time is Fulfilled

So, John said that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. In Mark 1:14-15, we read, "Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." Notice that immediately after John is put in prison, Jesus also begins preaching that the kingdom of God is at hand, and He now adds that "the time is fulfilled."

When John had finished his Old Testament ministry, Jesus began His New Testament ministry. As an Old Testament prophet, John prepared the way for Jesus' New Testament ministry. John's ministry was one of preparation. Jesus' ministry was one of fulfillment. Part of John's preparation was to preach that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. And, as soon as Jesus started His ministry, as we have seen, He went about "preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel."

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Many preachers now seem not to be aware that Jesus' Gospel included "the gospel of the kingdom of God," and that the message was specifically, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel." They overlook that this same Gospel of the kingdom was preached in Matthew 4:17; 10:7; Luke 4:43; 8:1; and so on. Not many preachers today talk of this Gospel of the kingdom.

On the other hand, those who do speak of this Gospel of the kingdom usually misinterpret it to refer to a kingdom in the future, a kingdom still in our future in which Jesus and the Jews will rule for a thousand years. But Jesus specifically said to the Jews, "Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matthew 21:43). That "nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" is the same as that nation Peter addresses in 1 Peter 2:9-10: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy." That nation in the Greek is called the *ekklēsia*, the people of God who are called out of this world. In most Bibles, this word is translated, "the church."

At Hand

To understand Jesus' message, we must understand what John the Baptist and Jesus meant when they said that the kingdom of God was "at hand." Let's let the Bible interpret itself. In Luke 21:29-32, we read, "And he spake to them a parable; Behold the fig tree, and all the trees; when they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled." Many people seem to want to ignore what Jesus says here, but the meaning is really very clear. Jesus was telling the people standing there listening to Him that, just as summer is at hand when trees start to send out their shoots, so the kingdom of God was right then at hand and the things He told them would come to pass in their lifetimes.

Notice another example of "at hand" in Mark 14:42-43: "Rise up, let us go; lo, he that betrayeth me is at hand. And immediately, while he yet spake, cometh Judas, one of the twelve, and with him a great

multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders." Jesus said that His betrayer—Judas—was "at hand," and "immediately, while he yet spake, cometh Judas." What does the Bible tell us "at hand" means? The Bible tells us that "at hand" means the next immediate thing in the sequence of events, or even right now.

So, Jesus' announcement was not good news of some kingdom of God coming two thousand or so years after He spoke. Jesus was saying that the kingdom of God was, at that time, coming. Certainly, this was good news! And it should be good news to us also, because the kingdom of God is still here! You are living in the time of the kingdom of God right now.

You Must Be Born Again

But you look around and see all kinds of troubles in the world. How is this then the kingdom of God? Jesus said troubles in this world are normal (Matthew 24:6-7; John 16:33). He also said, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). And this is how the Gospel of the kingdom is seen as but a facet of the larger Gospel message of salvation. When we are born again and exercise the gift of faith, we see the kingdom of God by faith using the spiritual sight God gives us, and we enter it by faith. We see that it is not a kingdom that is of this world, but it is in it (John 18:36; 17:9-16).

The Gospel tells us that Jesus died to save His people from their sins. But He did not intend that we just stuff that salvation into our pockets and go back to our worldly way of life. To have a full picture of the Gospel, we should understand that God, through His dear Son, has not only saved us and "delivered us from the power of darkness," but He also "hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son" (Colossians 1:13). Our citizenship is now in heaven (Philippians 3:20). "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:20). An ambassador does not entangle himself in the affairs of the nation to which he is sent. Instead, he carries out the commission given him, always putting his nation's interests first. Our nation is the kingdom of God. Let us not become distracted by the affairs of this world or the nation of our physical birth, but put our resources into carrying out the commission the captain of our salvation (Hebrews 2:10) has given us (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15) and putting the interests of our kingdom above all else (Matthew 6:33; 2 Timothy 2:4).