

What Is "Preaching the Gospel"?

by Anthony Buzzard

What, according to Jesus, was the purpose of his whole mission? What is the purpose of Christianity?

"I came to call sinners to repentance" (Lk. 5:32).

"I came to save that which was lost" (Lk. 19:10).

"I came to destroy the works of the Devil" (see 1 Jn. 3:8).

But how did he do it?



"I must preach the Gospel about the Kingdom of God. That's what I was sent to do" (Luke 4:43).

A popular form of evangelism tells us that Jesus appealed to the public to "ask him into their hearts." This language apparently has no basis in the recorded words of Jesus. It gives free rein to the human imagination. It does not seem to reflect Jesus' evangelistic method. How then did Jesus invite sinners to become believers?

The answer to this question was the primary concern of the Bible writers. After all, they were also evangelists, hoping with their written records to win others to salvation. What was their message and method?

Undoubtedly it was the message and method learned from Jesus' own example of preaching the Gospel. Today, however, many seem puzzled by the idea that Jesus was a Gospel-preacher. Did he not just die and rise from the dead? Was that not sufficient basis for salvation? The answer must be a clear-cut "no." If the death and resurrection of Jesus are all there is to *the Gospel*, why did Jesus preach the Gospel for some three years *without at that stage presenting any information about his death and resurrection*? How were the apostles able to go out under Jesus' supervision and *preach the Gospel and offer salvation* (Luke 8:1; 9:2, 6), when the death and resurrection of Jesus were as yet unknown to them? (See Luke 18:31-34; John 20:9).

The facts are very simple. Jesus came to save the lost. He came to call sinners to repentance. How he went about this central task, however, seems largely to escape the notice of churchgoers. The plain answer is that Jesus presented a Message and invited people to believe that Message. Here are his opening words, and they are typical of his whole ministry.

Everything Jesus said is really an expansion of this opening statement about how salvation is to be gained:

"Repent and believe the Gospel Message about the Kingdom of God" (Mark 1:14, 15).

This is a summary statement of the Christian faith provided by Mark at the outset of his evangelistic account of Jesus and his career as evangelist and Savior. The Kingdom is the organizing center of all that Jesus taught.

Jesus was the original evangelist:

“Salvation was first proclaimed by the Lord [Jesus]” (Heb. 2:3).

How could we have missed the basis of the Christian faith as Jesus preached it? The answer is that we have been bombarded with language about sin and forgiveness and the blood of Jesus (also essential elements of the Gospel), but we have apparently been steered away from the obvious fact (once one sees it) that such *forgiveness is secured also on the basis of responding intelligently to Jesus’ Gospel about the Kingdom.*

Jesus’ teaching is straightforward on this point. He compared his saving Gospel teaching to a seed sown in the heart. The seed is called the Gospel/Word about the Kingdom (Matt. 13:19) — abbreviated sometimes to simply “the word of God” (Luke 8:11), “the word” (Mark 4:14). That seed/Message he commands us to understand, believe and embrace. It must be accepted by our minds and become the mainspring of our lives. According to Jesus, repentance means abandoning our own philosophy of life and becoming devoted to his Gospel of the Kingdom: By turning away from our own agendas we are to embrace his agenda — what he constantly called the Kingdom of God Gospel. (Many churchgoers today are heavily committed to current political programs, but Jesus was very little concerned with social action. He was interested in the ultimate question of God’s politics. The kingdoms of this present world are by definition not Christian. They are part of Satan’s world. Christians do not belong to this system; they are “not of this world.” The world will become the Kingdom of God only at Christ’s return (Rev. 11:15-18; Dan. 7:14, 18, 22, 27; 2:44; Mic. 4:8; Obad.21).

The Kingdom of God is the new world order to be inaugurated by Christ at his return to this earth (Acts 1:6; 3:21). We must prepare now with all urgency for its coming. Christians are to help others to respond also to Jesus’ Kingdom Gospel challenge, including, of course, his sacrificial death and his resurrection.

Jesus complained that many are reluctant to repent *on his terms*. They prefer their own terms. They may well be disposed to give up whatever they have conceived as sinful and ungodly. But the issue for Jesus is not a vague conviction of ungodliness but an **understanding response** to his saving appeal: *belief in the Gospel of the Kingdom*. Jesus laid out this central fact about salvation in Mark 4:11, 12. He explained that it was failure to embrace *his Gospel/word about the Kingdom* which prevented people from coming to him and being saved.

*“To you [Christian disciples] the mystery of the Kingdom of God has been given or made known [Matt. 13:11], but to the others the Message comes in parables: they see and do not perceive and they hear and do not understand. **If they did they would repent and be forgiven**” (Mark 4:11, 12).*

The issue in regard to repentance is very obviously here the *reception or non-reception of Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom*. Luke reports the same truth with equal clarity.

“When anyone hears the Gospel/word [about the Kingdom, Matt. 13:19] and does not understand it, the Devil comes and snatches away the Gospel which has been sown in his heart [mind] so that he cannot believe it and be saved” (Luke 8:12).

Here evidently repentance and forgiveness are *conditional upon* the intelligent acceptance of the preaching of the Kingdom of God by Jesus.

Yet, in current evangelism, no such information about the Kingdom of God is offered to the potential convert. Rather he is told to “acknowledge his sin” and “accept Jesus” who died for him. But this method skips over — bypasses — the essential step on which Jesus laid so much emphasis. On the evidence of the words of Jesus above, is forgiveness offered apart from repentance and acceptance of the Gospel of the Kingdom? Is repentance possible in the absence of a grasp of the Kingdom of God?

Luke in Acts 8:12 presents a very clear “formula” for becoming members of the body of Christ. Once again, following Jesus’ own evangelistic model, the issue is the acceptance or refusal of the Gospel about the Kingdom.

“When they believed Philip as he preached the Gospel about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were getting baptized, both men and women” (Acts 8:12).

Surprisingly this is not the way modern evangelicals see salvation. In their minds the death and resurrection of Jesus have swallowed up any necessity to heed the actual words of Jesus when he preached salvation. A remedy for this puzzling situation would be to insist on preaching the Gospel from the gospels themselves, *starting* with the words of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These four corroborating accounts make it impossible to avoid the simple fact that the primary and fundamental element in the Gospel is the acceptance of Jesus by accepting his Gospel of the Kingdom.

“If you do not believe Moses, how can you believe my words?” “He who hears my Message/Gospel and believes him who sent me has eternal life” (John 5:47, 24).

The following sayings of Jesus are most pertinent to our subject and should, we think, call for a revolution in what is presented to the public for salvation:

“Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will not enter it” (Luke 18:17; cp. John 17:8, “receive my words”).

“Unless you are converted and become like children you will not enter the Kingdom of God” (Matt. 18:3).

“Unless a person is born again, he cannot see/enter the Kingdom of God” (John 3:3-5).

Combining Jesus' various statements we have this:

Unless you hear and understand the Kingdom Gospel of Jesus and the apostles you cannot repent and be forgiven. Unless you are converted, become like children, get born again and receive the Kingdom of God, you won't enter it, be saved (Mark 4:11, 12, 14; John 3:3, 5; Luke 8:12; Matt. 13:19.)

When his audience had refused Paul's solemn, dawn till dusk exercise in persuasion and testimony *about the Kingdom of God* from the Bible,

"some were not persuaded, would not believe; some believed" (Acts 28:23, 24).

So then, being persuaded about the Kingdom and Jesus means believing, becoming a Christian.

"If they did not close their minds, if they heard and saw and understood [the Kingdom Gospel] with their hearts they would repent and be forgiven" (Mark 4:12).

Salvation in the words of Jesus is always dependent on an intelligent understanding and reception by the mind of the truth about the Kingdom of God and Jesus' death and resurrection.

Hence,

*"He who **hears my word** [about the Kingdom of God] and believes Him who sent me has eternal life" (John 5:24).*

Salvation is dependent on hearing, understanding and obeying the words of Jesus. Faith means believing what Jesus and the apostles say and acting on those words. Thus Paul concludes, as a career preacher of the Gospel of the Kingdom (Acts 20:25),

"Faith originates in hearing and hearing by means of Christ's Message" (Rom. 10:17).

But the missing link in the chain of salvation, as popularly presented, seems to be a massive disregard for what Jesus proclaimed as the Gospel.