

The Gospel of American Individualism Versus the Gospel of the Kingdom

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While the kingdom of God was the central theme of all gospel preaching in the New Testament, it has been virtually ignored by modern evangelists in the Western world.

Considering the amount of time Jesus spent teaching and preaching about the kingdom, one assumes that the heralds of the twenty-first century would emulate their master. But not so!

Biblical scholars such as Ladd, Beasley-Murray, and Wright,¹ whose insightful writings on the kingdom of God have impacted New Testament and theology departments in our seminaries, have barely seen the light of day in our departments of evangelism. As a result, professors of evangelism persist in teaching their students to preach a message and follow a method of evangelism whose roots can more easily be traced to the American Frontier rather than back to Jesus. Therefore, is it any wonder that an anthropocentric gospel of American individualism has replaced the God-centered “gospel of the kingdom?”

A Personal Investigation

Over the past several years, I have made a point to examine scores of evangelistic programs and publications to determine if and to what extent they focus on the kingdom of God.

¹For example see George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); and more recently, N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

My findings show a great dearth in the area. For example, *Evangelism Explosion* and *F.A.I.T.H.*, the two most popular evangelistic programs used in American churches, do not mention or examine the kingdom at all. Likewise, none of the best-selling evangelistic tracts produced by our two largest tract societies deal with the kingdom in any significant way.² Neither do such gospel booklets as *The Four Spiritual Laws*, *Steps to Peace with God*, and *Bridge to Life*. Additionally, within the past decade, no academic textbook on evangelism has been written which gives adequate attention to the kingdom.³

This absence of kingdom-centered evangelism has had devastating effects on the western church and has now reached a critical mass. The deficiency is so great that most evangelists and professors of evangelism would be hard-pressed to even define the “gospel of the kingdom” (Matt 24:14; Mark 1:14). Consequently, few who profess faith in Christ are actually converted, making for an anemic form of Christianity devoid of spiritual power and vigor.

The Southern Baptist Convention and the Kingdom of God

A recent development has occurred within the Southern Baptist Convention that has the potential to change this trend. In late 1999, a group of SBC executives and state executives, facing a new millennium and a fast-paced, postmodern culture, met to discuss how the Southern Baptists could ever hope to be a vibrant influence in world evangelization. A task force was then formed, and after numerous meetings and times of spiritual and scriptural reflection, concluded that since Jesus focused exclusively on the kingdom of God, all Southern Baptists should focus

²The author is referring to the American Tract Society (Garland, Texas) and Good News Publishers (Wheaton, Illinois).

³In 1989, William J. Abraham wrote *The Logic of Evangelism* (Eerdmans), which drew attention to the fact that the kingdom of God is the missing dimension in evangelism. Since then, no further academic treatment of the subject has been forthcoming.

on it as well. They also examined a successful kingdom-oriented emphasis called *Empowering Kingdom Growth* (EKG) developed in the South Carolina Convention in the early 1990's.⁴ They borrowed the name and went to work to implement a similar agenda worldwide.

During the 2002 Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in St. Louis, Missouri, at the recommendation of the task force, the messengers voted unanimously to adopt a new spiritual initiative, which called upon Southern Baptist churches and members everywhere to concentrate fully on the kingdom of God. The vote was not simply for another program, but an entire new direction for the Convention. Henceforth, all SBC programs, boards and agencies will focus their full energies on kingdom ministry.

At the time of the vote, President James Merritt called the decision as significant for the Southern Baptist Convention as the decision made in 1925 to launch the Cooperative Program.⁵ The EKG task force wrote that the Empowering Kingdom Growth initiative “could prove to be an unprecedented turning point in American history,”⁶ considering that never before has such a large body of evangelicals decided to put aside secondary issues to concentrate solely on the kingdom of God.

Time will be the ultimate judge as to whether or not the heroic effort of the SBC succeeds. If it does, it will be because it has abandoned an Americanized gospel for the gospel of the kingdom.

The remainder of this paper will 1) discuss the biblical basis for preaching the gospel of the kingdom, 2) examine the nature of the gospel of the kingdom, 3) compare the gospel of

⁴Carlisle Driggers, “First Person: Kingdom Growth is Limitless,” *Baptist Press* (April 4, 2003), 1.

⁵Ibid.

⁶As quoted in Driggers, 2.

American individualism to the gospel of the kingdom, and finally 4) offer solutions to the problem facing evangelism in the Western world.

The Basis for Preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom

When John the Baptist came preaching “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!” (Matt. 3:2), his hearers understood he was referring to the eschatological age foretold by Old Testament prophets, a time when God would send a promised messianic king to defeat Israel’s enemies and usher in a new age of universal peace. John called people to break with the past as a requirement to enter the kingdom and escape the coming judgment.

After John’s arrest, “Jesus came preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand’” (Mark 1:14-15). Luke tells us that Jesus stood up in the synagogue and read a messianic passage from the scroll of Isaiah and concluded by saying, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). The kingdom had arrived with Jesus.

When later asked by the Sanhedrin if he were the promised Messiah, he replied, “I am” (Mark 14:62). The kingdom of God was no longer a distant hope. “It now had a name and a face—the name and face of the man from Nazareth.”⁷ The waiting period was over, and God was in a climactic way initiating his royal salvific work on earth.⁸ After revealing his identity in the synagogue and performing many miracles which demonstrated the in-breaking of the kingdom, Jesus told the crowds, “I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also, because

⁷Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 44.

⁸Carl F. H. Henry, “Reflections on the Kingdom of God,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (1992): 44.

for this purpose I have been sent” (Luke 4:43). Everywhere he went he proclaimed the “glad tidings of the kingdom of God” (Luke 8:1). The twelve apostles traveled with him.

Is it any wonder that when he sent them out, he commissioned them “to preach the kingdom” (Luke 9:1-2)? Mark’s parallel account of the event says, “So they went out and preached that people should repent” (Mark 6:12), showing that people must break with the past to enter the kingdom. Jesus then appointed seventy others to “heal the sick there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near you’” (Luke 10:1, 9).

Prior to his ascension, the resurrected Lord spent forty days with the apostles “speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). Thus, he *ended* his earthly ministry the way he *began* it—declaring the gospel of the kingdom!

On the mount, after assuring his followers that there would be a future dimension to the kingdom, he told them that in the interim they were to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). Therefore, it is not surprising to find them preaching “the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus” (Acts 8:12). The apostle Paul, likewise, taught “concerning the things of the kingdom of God” (Acts 19:8). He reminded the elders at Ephesus that he spent three years “preaching the kingdom of God” (Acts 20:25, 31). During his house arrest in Rome, “many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God” (Acts 28:23). The book of Acts closes significantly with these words, “Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him” (Acts 28:30-31). Since Paul spent three years in Ephesus and two more under house arrest preaching the kingdom, we may safely deduce that this was the focal point of his ministry.

There can be little doubt; the good news of the kingdom was the central theme of first century evangelistic preaching. Consequently, it should be our focus as well. Jesus says, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14).

The Nature of the Kingdom Message

Thus far, we have conclusively shown that the gospel is about the kingdom; but what exactly is the “gospel of the kingdom?” The essential idea of the kingdom is that as creator, God reigns over the universe (Ps. 72:8; Isa. 11:10). All those under God’s rule are subject to his laws. However, a satanic-led rebellion has taken place within his kingdom. Both heavenly and earthly beings have chosen to live independently of God’s rule. As Boyd observes, “The Old Testament clearly assumes that something profoundly sinister has entered God’s good creation and now perpetually threatens the world.”⁹

By usurping man’s God-given dominion over the earth, Satan has entrenched himself as the prince (*archon*) of this world. The cosmos, under his tyrannical rule (1 John 5:19), reels from pain, suffering and death. However, Satan’s reign will not continue forever.

The Old Testament reveals that God, in his sovereign grace, redeemed a people for his name. Israel was to submit to his rule and make his name known among the nations. Through her witness, his glory would be spread abroad. In turn, he would be her protector. At times Israel faithfully served God and was blessed, but often she paid him only lip service. Her willful disobedience often led to chastisement, calamity and even captivity.

Through his prophets, God called Israel back to himself and foretold a time when he would send a mighty deliverer to establish a new covenant with Israel and bring all things in

⁹Gregory A. Boyd, *God At War* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 171.

subjection to himself (Jer. 31:31; Ezek. 36:25-28). All independent kingdoms to which people give their allegiance would be destroyed.

When Christ stepped onto the scene proclaiming the kingdom of God, he immediately faced conflict with the devil and emerged from the desert victorious in the power of the Spirit. He bound up the strong man (Luke 11:21) and plundered his property by casting out demons, healing the oppressed, raising the dead, and calling on his hearers to submit to God's rule through repentance and faith. Jesus literally set the captives free (Luke 4:18), snatching people out of Satan's domain and placing them under the reign of God.

The masses sought to make Jesus their earthly king (John 6:15). His refusal turned their excitement into confusion. Why did he hesitate to overthrow the Roman authorities and establish God's kingdom? Even John the Baptist was dismayed and inquired from his prison cell if Jesus was the messiah (Luke 7:19).

Only after Peter's confession did Jesus reveal, "The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31). What a shock! John Bright in his classic, *The Kingdom of God*, remarks that the "Messiah King...should suffer and die was the last thing in the world that Jewish nationalism expected or wanted."¹⁰

Few realized that Christ's death would be the divinely appointed means to redeem mankind, win a decisive victory over the powers of evil, and ultimately establish God's own rule in Christ over all creation. The cross was God's death blow to sin, Satan and death, and thus became the "hinge of history" (John 12:31-32).

¹⁰John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), 200.

At his resurrection Christ emerged from the cosmic battle victorious, proving that God, not the rebels, was in charge. After all, if Jesus could enter the heart of enemy territory, and not be defeated, then their days were numbered! From that moment onward the world has never been the same.

Scripture is clear, however, that although Satan has been vanquished, he has not been banished from the earth. Satan and his minions still fight to retain their position of power over this world, but have been stripped of their “rights” to fallen humanity.

From his exalted position at God’s right hand, Christ now rules from his throne until his enemies become his footstool (Acts 2:35; 7:49; 1 Cor. 15:23-24; Heb. 1:13; 10:13). The powers of evil may still function, but only under the authority of Christ (Col. 2:15; 1:15-16; 1 Cor. 2:6-8). As Wright remarks, “All kingdoms are confronted with their rightful overlord.”¹¹ As sovereign, Christ also directs the course of history towards its victorious completion, i.e. the future establishment of his kingdom on earth and the judgment of all nations, which will take place at his coming.

The kingdom now finds root in God’s messianic community, the church. “It is here that God rules and that rule is spread throughout the earth.”¹² The church, which has been given the keys of the kingdom, is commissioned to take the gospel to all nations, calling upon individuals to submit to God’s rule in Christ and align themselves with others in his kingdom. Whenever and wherever the victory of Christ is proclaimed and obeyed, Satan must retreat.¹³ As God’s reign expands, Satan’s reign recedes.

¹¹N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 44.

¹²William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 93.

¹³Peter P. J. Beyerhaus, *God’s Kingdom and the Utopian Error* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992), 62.

As earth's legitimate king, Jesus demands allegiance from its inhabitants. He summons all to live in righteousness until his kingdom is fully manifested at the *parousia*, and all his enemies, including death, are destroyed. Bright calls this "eschatological living."¹⁴

We live in the "already but not yet" period of history,¹⁵ tasting of the heavenly powers to come (Heb. 6:4), but not experiencing the kingdom in its fullness. The kingdom, which was inaugurated through the life and ministry of Jesus, will not be consummated until he returns.

The Gospel of American Individualism Compared to the Gospel of the Kingdom

If Jesus and the apostles walked the earth today, one wonders if they would recognize the gospel being preached by most American evangelicals. A comparison between the New Testament gospel of the kingdom and the Americanized gospel is quite revealing.

COMPARISON 1: Whereas New Testament evangelism concentrated on initiating people into the eschatological reign of God, the gospel of American individualism concentrates on getting people into heaven.

Few gospel messages today emphasize the eschatological activity of God, which began in the life of Christ and continues in the church through the Holy Spirit. Rather they concentrate on the eternal bliss that awaits the believer at death. American evangelicals preach a gospel of heaven. But what about a person's life between the "here and now" when he believes and the "then and there" when he is transferred to glory?

Even the proponents of the "Lordship gospel" and the "free grace gospel" miss the point entirely. As Dallas Willard correctly observes, both sides focus on going to heaven and

¹⁴Bright, *The Kingdom of God*, 223.

¹⁵A phrase coined by George Eldon Ladd, which appears in all his kingdom-related writings.

forgiveness of sins; they only differ on how to get there.¹⁶ Likewise, *Evangelism Explosion* and *F.A.I.T.H.*, two of the more popular church evangelism programs, give enormous attention to the issue of heaven. Yet few, if any, gospel sermons in the New Testament deal with heaven. Rather they focus on the kingdom and what it means to be part of it, now and in the future. A completely futuristic eschatology strips Christianity of its relevance.

COMPARISON 2: Whereas, New Testament evangelism concentrated on calling people to public repentance and obedience, the gospel of American individualism focuses on meeting the felt needs of the hearers.

The gospel of American individualism is characterized by such phrases as “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” Evans reminds us that “too many individuals, families, churches, and communities want to keep God on the fringes of our lives. There He can be accessible if we have a need, but we can keep Him far enough away from the center of our lives that He doesn’t start messing with our agendas.”¹⁷ Jesus is often viewed as a genie in a bottle, who answers when called upon, without any demands placed on the believer.

Evans additionally observes:

They come to church looking for a “discount God.” They want God on sale. They come saying, “God, I want You and Your kingdom, but I want it at a discount. Give me a sale price on Your kingdom. I want a little of this and a little of that but not the whole package. So give me 30 percent off the ticketed price.”

People don’t want a God who is sovereign, a God who says, “This is the package. When you get Me, you get My kingdom. And when you get My kingdom, you get My rules.” There are no discounts in God’s kingdom. He is sovereign. He rules over all.”¹⁸

¹⁶Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 46-47.

¹⁷Tony Evans, *The Kingdom Agenda* (Nashville: Word, 1999), xxiv. While not an academic treatise on the kingdom of God, Evans calls this book his magnum opus because he considers its content to be the weightiest he has dealt with to date. Evans makes a valiant effort to apply kingdom truths to the local church.

¹⁸Evans, *The Kingdom Agenda*, 8.

According to Abraham, “The kingdom of God has its own internal requirements, which are not at our disposal to change at will.”¹⁹ God requires repentance; a paradigm shift; a reorientation of one’s life; a turning from sin and darkness to God and Christ (Acts 3:19, 26; 9:35; 11:21; 26:18; 2 Cor. 3:16; 1 Thess. 1:9; 2 Tim. 2:19).

COMPARISON 3: Whereas New Testament evangelism emphasized *salvation history*, the gospel of American individualism produces an ahistorical existentialism.

The typical gospel message today offers salvation in four easy steps. The call usually revolves around some subjective experience or action to be taken, e.g. invite Christ into your heart or repeat a sinner’s prayer. Such concepts cannot be found in the New Testament. Contrast that with Stephen’s evangelistic sermon, which recounted for his listeners the great events of Israel’s past; even the place where Abraham bought his tomb (Acts 7:2-53). Likewise, Peter’s sermon on Pentecost is filled with history from beginning to end (Acts 2:14-39). Paul often reasoned from the Old Testament proving that Jesus was the Christ, linking him to Abraham, Moses, David and others. Even on Mars Hill, he started with creation and moved forward to judgment (Acts 17:24-31). His sermon content spanned history.

The *kerygma* is the story of God working in history; of Israel's failures and God's faithfulness. And it is the story of what God has done ultimately in Jesus to dethrone Satan and plunder his kingdom. It centers on the cross where the war was decisively won and the subsequent resurrection of Jesus from the dead to be declared God’s son in power (Rom. 1:4). Evangelism involves the retelling of the story and a call for the hearers to become part of God’s great plan for history. It is primarily about God, not about us.

¹⁹Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 107.

COMPARISON 4: Whereas New Testament evangelism places emphasis on community, the gospel of American individualism has become a private matter.

The gospel of American individualism creates a horde of individual Christians but not a community. One possible reason is that so much evangelism is being done by parachurch organizations and spiritual lone-rangers, who seek professions of faith but do not baptize nor teach their inquirers to live for Christ (Matt. 28:18-20). Rarely do their so-called converts darken the door of a local church.

Some churches are just as guilty of promoting a form of evangelism that makes no demands on those professing faith in Christ. Seeker-sensitive churches, for example, often allow visitors and even members to remain anonymous.

According to the gospel of the kingdom, it is incoherent to believe that one can enter that reign of Christ and remain outside the church.²⁰ Becoming a citizen of the kingdom cannot be done in a vacuum anymore than a foreigner can become a citizen of the United States without rubbing shoulders with other Americans. There is a corporate or community aspect to citizenship. It includes responsibility and privileges that can not be found by living in isolation.

COMPARISON 5: Whereas New Testament evangelists preached Christ as King, with implications for society as a whole, the gospel of American individualism places stress on personal experience.

Newbigin reminds us that religion can flourish in a society as long as it remains a private affair and does not attempt to impact society.²¹ The early church could have escaped persecution of the Roman Empire if it had been satisfied to be treated as a *cultus privatus*. However, the gospel of the kingdom has universal implications. When Jason, in whose house Paul preached,

²⁰See William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 130.

²¹Lesslie Newbigin, *Signs Amid the Rubble* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 91.

was dragged into the streets, the charge was “these do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, one Jesus” (Acts 17:5). The entire town and its rulers were troubled!

The gospel goes against societal norms and mores, and challenges the *powers that be* for the allegiance of their subjects. Persecution and suffering frequently accompany the preaching of the pure gospel. That is to be expected. Suffering is part of the evangelistic mandate.

A watered-down gospel that strips away the demands for the building of a righteous society is an “insipid religion concerned only with personal benefit” and “the ultimate self-fulfillment plan.”²²

Proposed Solutions

The following suggestions could assist in the redirection of contemporary American evangelism away from a stringent individualism back to a biblical and theological emphasis upon the kingdom of God. First, evangelism professors at our SBC seminaries need to become more aware of the available scholarly studies, which deal with the kingdom of God, and incorporate teaching the “gospel of the kingdom” into their evangelism curricula. Second, evangelism professors must spend proportionately more classroom time focusing on the theology of evangelism, which centers on the kingdom of God than on methodology that gets so-called results. We should stress message over method. Third, professors of evangelism should consider writing articles on the relationship between evangelism and the kingdom of God for publication in both popular magazines and professional journals. Fourth, the *Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education*²³ should address at their next annual meeting the

²²Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 86.

²³The AETE, a professional society for Professors of Evangelism, publishes the *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* (Ambridge, PA).

deficiency of kingdom-centered evangelism and pass a resolution calling on publishers to give more attention to the theological quality of its evangelism books and tracts. Fifth, pastors must stop using watered-down forms of evangelism, including gospel literature and itinerant parachurch crusaders who push a subjective, individualistic, and existential gospel. Rather, pastors should start focusing on church-based, kingdom-oriented evangelism. Sixth, Southern Baptist evangelists must examine their own gospel messages in order to bring them in line with correct kingdom teaching. Finally, the North American Mission Board, the International Mission Board, and LifeWay Christian Resources should start producing new kingdom-themed evangelistic materials and programs, and revise current materials and programs to reflect the new Empowering Kingdom Growth emphasis.

In conclusion, we would do well to remember that the kingdom must be the starting point for all evangelism. If one fails to declare the good news of the kingdom, he fails to proclaim the authentic gospel.