

The Gospel: Of First Importance

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Christ's Proclamation: the Gospel of the Kingdom of God

When studying the Bible it is always necessary to remember that the one subject that should be of first importance is the gospel – that is, the good news of salvation concerning the coming kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Before the day of Pentecost, the gospel focused on the good news of the coming kingdom of God. The Old Testament Scriptures had promised the coming of the Messiah, or Christ, who would establish the everlasting kingdom of God in a renewed and glorious earth. The chief focus of Christ's entire earthly ministry was to proclaim, explain and demonstrate the true nature of God's kingdom through all his words and deeds. This can be clearly seen by a couple of examples from the Gospels:

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 is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14-15).

At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent." (Luke 4:42-43).

For every pious Jew this proclamation of the kingdom of God meant that the "time had come" when the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of Christ, the destruction of evil, the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, and the final establishment of the kingdom of God in a renewed and glorious earth were "at hand." It was necessary therefore to repent – to turn from sin to God – so as to escape the wrath to come and to receive eternal life in the coming age of the kingdom of God.

It cannot be emphasized enough that proclaiming, explaining and demonstrating this coming kingdom of God was the central focus of Christ's earthly ministry. It is suggested that the reader go through the Gospel of Luke and note each time that the term "kingdom of God" is used and look at their contexts. In addition, it is also necessary to note the inter-relationship of terms such as kingdom of God, eternal life and salvation. Biblically, salvation is a comprehensive term. It refers primarily to forgiveness of sins and therefore escape – or salvation - from the condemnation of the final judgment. As a result, rather than being condemned, the believer will inherit the gift of eternal life – life of the age to come - in the glorious kingdom of God. It is towards this goal that the whole biblical story – from Genesis to Revelation - moves.

Two records in the Gospels that explain the centrality of the kingdom of God in the thinking of all New Testament believers are John 3:1-17 and Luke 18:18-30. In the first, Christ indicates that it is necessary to be born again if one is to enter the kingdom of God. How is that done? The Letter of I John chapter 5:1 says "whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." But this could not occur until after Christ's death and resurrection and the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost. In the second record in Luke, Christ shows the difficulty of entering the kingdom of God by our own efforts – i.e., by keeping the Mosaic Law. However, Jesus makes it clear that entering the kingdom of God, though perhaps impossible for men, *is* possible with God. However, there is a divine necessity for Christ "to give his life as a ransom for many" because of the weakness and sinfulness of man – in other words, mankind needs a Savior.

The New Covenant Proclamation: The Gospel of Salvation

The Gospels, therefore, indicate that there was a problem that required Christ's sacrificial death, resurrection and the giving of the Spirit. It then records Christ accomplishing these events and portrays this as the fulfillment of the new covenant promised in the Old Testament Scriptures (Luke 22:14-20). The necessity of these events and their fulfillment of Old Testament promises was made clear by Christ himself:

“I tell you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. (Luke 22:18-20).

Then he opened their minds so that they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:45-49).

Since the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost, it is these “Christ-events” that have become the focus of the “gospel.” Thus, after the life, death and resurrection of Christ and the giving of the holy Spirit on Pentecost there are some basic changes, or rather additions, to the “gospel” message. It still focuses on the good news of eternal life in the coming kingdom of God because that is its final goal. This can be clearly seen by continuing through the Book of Acts and noting all the references to the kingdom of God as summed up in Paul’s teaching in the last two verses of Acts:

“For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Acts 28:30-31).

Despite this continuing focus on the coming kingdom of God, after Pentecost the *central* focus of the “gospel” shifts to the death and resurrection of Christ and the giving of the Spirit to all who believe in him. The new covenant has been established and Christ has become the means by which redemption and salvation have now been accomplished for all who have faith in him. This shift in focus is evident in the apostles’ teaching in Acts and in all of the New Testament Letters. In short, Christ died for our sins and God raised him from the dead making him Lord over God’s people and creation. He is the

“firstborn” from the dead; therefore, the resurrection has *already* begun. In addition, he has *already* entered into his glory and has become the prototype for those who believe in him. Thus, the one who preached has become the one who *is* preached and salvation becomes dependent on his accomplishments. In short, those who believe in the life, death and resurrection of Christ are forgiven of their sins and are thus “saved” from “the wrath to come”, i.e., God’s final judgment of condemnation against sinners. They receive the “firstfruits” of God’s Spirit, becoming children in God’s family, and, as heirs of God, have the hope of eternal life in the coming kingdom of God.

This is truly “good news!” And that’s why the apostles and disciples were so committed to it and so excited about it. When the apostle Paul went on his missionary journeys his chief priority was to set before the people this “good news” (e.g. Acts 13 & 14). He explained the importance of this “gospel” in his First Letter to the Corinthians:

Now brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you have received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you, otherwise you have believed in vain.

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures ... this is what we preach, and this is what you believed (I Cor. 15:1-11; cf. Rom. 10:9-10).

It is this “gospel of salvation” (Eph. 1:13) concerning the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that is “of first importance” in the Scriptures. All of the central truths of this gospel of salvation are summed-up in the new covenant message as beautifully symbolized in the Lord’s Supper (I Cor. 11:23-26). That is why the early Christians churches focused their gatherings around it. The key to Bible study is to begin with, and focus on, this “gospel” of salvation. Then branch out from there to gain a wider scope and understanding of the Bible as a whole.