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THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL and the MINISTRY OF THE KINGDOM



Brian Medway

GRACE CANBERRA

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THE GREAT COMMISSION and the KINGDOM OF GOD

Prior to his ascension, Jesus gave the eleven remaining apostles (representing the church) the responsibility of preaching the gospel to every created person.¹ Even though it is as clear a command as any that Jesus may have given it is not one that the church has obeyed. Take a cross section of everything that even the most committed believers and groups of believers may be doing they have not taken the full import of this command seriously.

I don't really know what kind of expectation that creates for you, but I suspect you would might see yourself talking to someone and, at some point in the conversation, turning the subject to Jesus Christ. If the person continues to show interest you might tell them that Jesus came to die for their sins and if they were to receive him as their Saviour he would give them the gift of eternal life. You might then lead them in a prayer of repentance and commitment to Christ. The wonderful thing about that is that they may well experience the salvation you spoke about and go on to know and serve Jesus for the rest of eternity.

If you are familiar with the "Bridge Illustration" or the "Four Spiritual Laws" or methods and questionnaires associated with Evangelism Explosion, you would probably see your response to the Great Commission as the motive to try and use these methods as often as you could. If you got a chance to talk with someone and use one or other of those presentations, you would probably feel satisfied and if you didn't you may even feel frustrated or disappointed.

The problem here is not that you and many other people might or might not use one of those particular tools. The problem is that you would miss out on so many opportunities to proclaim the gospel if preaching the gospel was only seen through the filter of those tools or ones like them. A few hundred years of evangelicalism in the church, especially in the west, has confined evangelism to the duo of using tools such as these and the idea of inviting people to attend an evangelistic meeting. Whichever variation might be used, the message is generally the same. The bad end of the spectrum would have someone promising sinners solutions to all their problems if they believe in Jesus. The best end of it would have a message that basically offers people a ticket to heaven. I don't think I've ever heard anyone telling people that Jesus is offering them a selflessly cross bearing live of following Jesus.²

To run the risk of annoying repetition, I need to point out that these ideas are based on selected Biblical truth. The problem is not in what they say but what tends to be excluded. A core exclusion is often the fact that the ministry modelled by Jesus is often absent from the exercise. In order to think more practically about gospel ministry modelled by Jesus we will need to link another important term to the word gospel. That will need to be the word "kingdom." Jesus talks about the outworking of what he would commission his followers to do. On this occasion he says that this work will involve a proclamation of the "and this ***gospel of the kingdom*** will be proclaimed to the whole world as a testimony to every nation and then the end will come."³

¹ Mark 16:15, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."

² Cp Luke 9:23ff.

³ Matthew 24:14

Somehow our evangelical experience has succeeded in convincing ourselves that it is possible to preach the gospel without regard for the idea of the coming of the kingdom of God. The reason this is such a sad divorce is because the two are indivisible in the ministry of Jesus itself. The ministry of Jesus was a consistent modelling of the gospel AS the work of the kingdom. If you take what Jesus was, said and did as a foundational case study, the message and ministry of the kingdom of God IS the message and ministry of the gospel. It works just the same if it is said in the reverse order. The message and ministry of the gospel IS the message and ministry of the kingdom of God.

So much has been written about the kingdom of God. It is one of those Biblical phrases that has eminent recognition. Sometimes that is precisely the problem. We hear it so often that we think we know what it means, but when pressed we find it hard to come up with a good practical working definition. My own desire to understand what the kingdom of God is and how it is meant to shape what we are and do as followers of Jesus has led me to settle on the following definition. It comes in the words of Jesus when he taught his disciples to pray:

“...may your kingdom come, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”⁴

My reading of these two phrases have them operating as a form of Hebrew literary parallelism where the idea of a phrase is repeated using different words. It is a tool used to create colour and emphasis. If this is the case, the coming of the kingdom describes the will of God being done in the earth as it is being done in heaven. The last part of the second phrase, “..as it is in heaven” may be speaking about the fact that the will of God is welcomed and honoured in heaven and the coming of the kingdom is when there is the same desire on the earth to seek the will of God as there is a desire in heaven to seek and do God’s will. It could also mean that when the kingdom of God comes it results in the life of heaven happening on the earth. I think both are worthy of the text and are supported elsewhere in the Bible.

It also works when applied to the ministry of Jesus. Everything Jesus did resulted in heaven happening on the earth. When someone was healed, they were experiencing heaven because there is no sickness in heaven. When someone was forgiven they were experiencing heaven because there is full forgiveness in heaven. When someone embraced the truth they were experiencing heaven because heaven is the full expression of liberating and pure eternal reality. When Jesus blessed children he was acting just the way God acts in heaven because heaven is the environment where children are valued and loved without hindrance.

The sense in which the ministry of the gospel is the ministry of the KINGDOM of heaven has to do with rule and authority. Kingdom is a word that describes a realm where a king rules. This idea has a million examples even though the word “kingdom” is more commonly associated with a political system belonging to a previous era in history. The Prime Minister of Australia has the authority to go just about anywhere he wants in Australia, but if he wants to go to Indonesia he has to ask the ruling authority of that domain and only when the ruling authority of that domain gives permission can the Australian Prime Minister travel to that nation – and vice versa. Australia is a dominion where Australian laws provide the governance. We live under their rule. Those laws don’t apply as soon as you leave Australian sovereign territory.

⁴ Matthew 6:10

Jesus came to earth with authority from heaven to establish the rule of God in the earth by arresting the incumbent ruler and removing his authority to rule. Jesus demonstrated this rule over disease, demonic presence and the natural elements. It was a very different kind of kingdom from any of those that exercised influence in Judea, Galilee or anywhere else in the Roman world (or anywhere on earth for that matter). It becomes very obvious that the advancing kingdom represented by the ministry of Jesus did not seek, nor need the authorization of high priest, king or Roman governor. He didn't need to be elected nor gain any human status or position. He didn't need weapons or an army. He didn't use coercion of any kind. The ministry of the kingdom of God was not dependent on any of those very familiar instruments of human governance and rule.

The kingdom of God can be seen in the way Jesus involved followers and disciples. Everyone who followed him did so of their own free will and were free to come and go at will. No one was manipulated or threatened. Crowds sometimes flocked to him and at other times they walked away from him. People received ministry from Jesus and were never asked to pay for their benefits nor were they offered a free book if they chose to make a donation. One week in Jerusalem they were hailing him as the one who came in the name of the Lord and the next week they were calling for him to be crucified. It was a kingdom of God operation and was by definition based on free will choice. As Greg Boyd has articulated so profoundly, the kingdom of God was a "power under" kingdom, not a "power over" kingdom. Jesus came to serve not to be served. He made himself of no reputation so he wasn't interested in chasing people down when things were said that reflected badly on his reputation. He came to take the blame so that others could receive the blessing. He came to love enemies not destroy them. He came to redeem and the very outworking of that redemption was synonymous with the advance of the kingdom rule of God.

Historically we have seen the damaging impact of what are essentially re-inventions of Greek dualistic thinking on the message and ministry of the gospel. When we make the gospel all about getting a ticket to heaven we are setting life after death against life before death. When we allow a form of deistic humanism to focus our attention on politics, social welfare or economic prosperity we become equally dualistic. Some of these themes were the subject of divisions in the church created around the idea of the "spiritual gospel" and the "social gospel." The former was concerned primarily with a person's eternal destiny at the expense of their temporal well being. The latter was concerned primarily with their temporal well being at the expense of their spiritual or eternal well being. The idea of these emphases creating factions was about as stupid as the disciples arguing about who was the greatest just after none of them had been able to succeed in casting out a demon (Luke 9). Both of them were human inventions based on human reason rather than Biblical revelation. Both views failed to adequately embrace the ministry of Jesus in proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom.

REDISCOVERING THE MESSAGE AND MINISTRY OF THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

Jesus said that it was the privilege of the church to be given the keys of the kingdom.⁵ He said that if the church concerned itself with being, doing and proclaiming the [good news of the] kingdom of God, then he would build the church. We have adopted exactly the opposite stance. We have focused on building the numbers of people who attend a weekly meeting in a building we call church rather than discovering how to be, do and proclaim the good news of the kingdom. As a result we

⁵ Matthew 16

have compromised the gospel. Our penchant for human success and human comfort has condemned us to proclaim a consumer drive gospel and a humanistic version of Christian discipleship. My own observation is that the idea of trying to scare people into a commitment to Christ based on a lack of assurance about going to heaven happens because we have sold out a genuine commitment to offer people genuine kingdom of God ministry. It is the same with believers who have sold out kingdom of God ministry for a form of Christian welfare. We are equally compromised on the issue of the ministries of healing and driving out demons. Because we don't do that very well in our part of the world, we have sold out the ministry of the kingdom for a cerebral version of the gospel. We often try to intellectually convince people to believe in Jesus rather than offering them a genuine taste of heaven as Jesus did every day of the three years of his ministry.

In making these observations I am all too aware of my own lack in these areas. I find myself in need of a faith overhaul and am as much declaring the direction I intend to navigate rather than the sum of my own accomplishments. My complaint has to do with the way we seem to so easily take the more comfortable ground and then try to justify it be fine sounding arguments and a veritable litany of liturgies and religious rituals.

The quest of rediscovering the ministry of the gospel by rediscovering the ministry of the kingdom means that we need to go back to the gospels and allow the Holy Spirit to breathe into our hearts as we read the text. We all know the stories, but their supernatural life has not come to us as faith. I think it would be well for us to simply camp in the gospels for six months or so until what we read grabs our hearts and we get thoroughly detoxed from our compromises and their effects. Jesus said, after all, that the kingdom of God would not come unless it was embraced through repentance. The mark of the beginning of his ministry was described by the announcement: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."⁶ In whatever measure we are not experiencing the working of the kingdom of God in our lives is the measure of the mindsets and the beliefs that need to be repented of. If we read about casting our demons but don't see it happen very much, we must see the problem in terms of our lack of faith.

When we have re-read the gospels and noticed as much as we can of the ministry of the kingdom of God as exemplified by Jesus we may then move to the second phase. We need to detox from the idea that evangelism happens only when we talk with someone about whether they are going to heaven or hell. We must re-marry the idea of gospel ministry with kingdom ministry. We must look for opportunities to serve people with a taste of heaven as Jesus did. This kind of ministry must be allowed to restore Biblical integrity to the words "preaching the gospel." It must shout to us about the full range of ministry options seen in the three years of Jesus ministry. We must allow Calvary to define our way of loving and we must regard servant selflessness and suffering as an honour not as misfortune.

⁶ Matthew 4:17

PRACTICAL STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO REDISCOVER GOSPEL MINISTRY AS KINGDOM MINISTRY

1. **Create Your Own Kingdom Manual** Get yourself an exercise book that will only be used for this work. Read through one of the gospels a number of times and make notes about every occasion where Jesus was engaged in some form or other of doing the ministry of the kingdom of God. Look especially for the ways in which he embodied that by who he was. Then look for ways of seeing that in what he did. Look for an understanding of the teaching he gave about the nature and operation of the kingdom of God. What you need to aim for is to end up with your own "Kingdom of God Manual."

2. **Deliberately Become A Kingdom Person** Start to think about your own life. If the kingdom of God is within you and represents a set of attitudes and lifestyle values, think about some of these and start to cry out to God for an impartation that would see these things taking shape in your own heart. Ask God to highlight the circumstances that will give you opportunities to practice adopting kingdom of God postures and making kingdom of God responses.

3. **Start Thinking About Your Community Spheres As Kingdom Advance Zones** Ask the question about one or more of the spheres where you live or work [domestic, neighbourhood, workplace, community group, extended family]: If the kingdom of God fully came to this sphere what would be different? Start to think about what kind of things are preventing the kingdom of God from coming and what needs to be done to enable people to experience the kingdom of God coming. Use the examples you have of the ministry of Jesus and try to apply them to the particular circumstances of your spheres. Begin to pray for the faith to represent what God wants to do and then pray for the opportunity to be involved in seeing it happen.

4. **Begin to work on those things in your life that need repentance [things you need to change your mind about].** As we come up against all kinds of blocks and hindrances. These need to be overcome IN YOU before they can be overcome THROUGH YOU. The change needs to start with repentance, not with excuses or rationalizations. The gospel IS the power of God for salvation and Jesus said we need to see the circumstances around us as a harvest field not a mine field. These activities call for bold dependence on the Word of God, the immanent power of the Spirit of God, the encouragement of the saints and prayer that involves the experience of intimacy with God. It is not about any of those things. They are the tools you need to get the job done. That job is the ministry of the gospel/kingdom

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