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WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

By D.B. Knox

THE PROTESTANT FAITH
What is the gospel? It may appear a strange question as presumably Christians ought to be able to answer it without any hesitation. Yet, the question is not as simple as at first sight.

From one point of view, the gospel is "The whole counsel of God" which St. Paul said he had devoted his three years at Ephesus to teaching (Acts 20:27). But the usual New Testament phrase to describe the gospel is the "gospel of the kingdom of God". It was to preaching the kingdom of God that Jesus devoted his ministry (Matthew 4:23; Luke 4:43) and it was "this gospel of the kingdom" which Jesus foretold would be preached throughout the world (Matt. 24:14). So too, the apostles are described as preaching the kingdom. Thus, St. Paul described his three year ministry at Ephesus as "preaching the kingdom" (Acts 20:25) and St. Luke uses the same phrase "preaching the kingdom of God" to sum up St. Paul's activity at Rome (Acts 28:31). This phrase also describes Philip's preaching at Samaria (Acts 8:12).

The word "gospel" means "news" or message. Thus, throughout the New Testament the preaching of the gospel is preaching the news of the kingdom of God. But this doesn't help us moderns very much, as the phrase "kingdom of God" needs even more explanation. First, we should remember that the word "kingdom" means "rule", so that the kingdom of God means the rule of God. The concept goes back to the Old Testament where God is set forth as king. He is king firstly because He is Creator of heaven and earth and everything in them. This is an absolutely basic concept in the Bible. It was never far from the minds of the Christians as they looked out on the world and on the things happening to them in the world. Thus, they prefaced their prayer to God in Acts 4:24 by the ascription "O Lord, Thou that didst make heaven and earth and the sea and all that in them is". God's rule is the "eternal gospel" proclaimed in the Book of the Revelation, where we read: "worship Him that made the heaven and the earth and the sea and the fountains of water". (Rev. 14:7). God is king because He created everything and indeed owns everything, "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" and His will is supreme through-
out creation and in every event which takes place within it. Psalm 115 which affirms that "God made heaven and earth" (v.15) draws the conclusion "He hath done whatsoever He pleased" (v.3). That God is king would be axiomatic for those brought up on the Old Testament, but when the Christian preachers left the synagogue and spoke to the ordinary pagans of the Graeco-Roman world, they had to begin their message by affirming that God is Creator and therefore Judge of the world (Acts 14:15; 17:24). We probably have to do the same today, as the last fifteen years has seen a wholesale departure from the Bible's point of view about the world and about the judgement.

God is King not only throughout the universe and in our world, but particularly He is King within His own people. He is King as Israel, because He formed Israel for Himself, and redeemed the people from Egypt. The Old Testament looked forward to the time when God would exercise His rule more conspicuously; it looked forward to the time when the Lord of Hosts would set up His kingdom. Moreover, the Old Testament predicted that this kingdom or rule of God (for kingdom in scripture simply means rule) would be exercised through the promised messiah (Daniel 7:13). The messiah would be born into the human race ("behold a virgin shall conceive and bring forth a son") who would be a divine person, His name was to be Emmanuel, that is, God with us, and "Everlasting Father, Mighty God, Prince of Peace". (Isaiah 9:6). The prophets looked forward to the coming of God's rule and kingdom on the "day of the Lord", that future event when God would establish His rule of righteousness and justice. The day when the Lord came to judge the earth was a day to look forward to with rejoicing. All nature is to "clap their hands and sing for joy" in anticipation (Ps. 98:8). Isaiah foretold that it would be a day of righting wrongs, the captives would be set free, and the poor would have the good news proclaimed to them. It would be the day of vengeance of our God (Isaiah 61). It would be the day when the people of God were purified, the righteous vindicated and the sinners scourged out from among them. "When the Lord shall wash away the filth of His people and have purged the crime from the midst of them by the Spirit of judgement and by the Spirit of burning". Malachi foretold that the divine
messiah would come to purify His people, washing out the dirt with soap, and burning up the dross with fire (Malachi 3:1-3).

John the Baptist looked forward to the dawning of this day of the Lord in the immediate future. He called on his hearers to prepare themselves by repentance, for God's rule was about to be established, and he said that the messiah was already present in their midst, and would soon baptise His people with the Holy Spirit and fire, thus recalling the prophecy of Isaiah 4:4 which spoke of God washing His people from their sins and purifying them with the Spirit of judgement and of burning. John's message was "repent for the kingdom of God is at hand" and Jesus took this up and preached the same gospel message. What puzzled John the Baptist later was the fact that although the kingdom had come with the messiah, the refining fire of judgment and "the day of vengeance of our God" was still postponed into the future, and this position remains with us today. We preach the gospel of the kingdom of God with the call to repent in view of the coming judgement; and yet there is a most important element of the gospel as it is now is revealed to us in the New Testament which was still hidden from John the Baptist, and this is the relationship of Jesus the messiah both to the coming of the kingdom, that is to the rule of God, and to the salvation offered to escape from the coming judgement, which God's rule involves.

This important addition and explication may be illustrated from the interesting little incident in the beginning of Acts 19 when St. Paul discovered a group of disciples at Ephesus who had believed the gospel but who as yet knew nothing of Jesus. It is worth noting that they are described as disciples and believers and St. Paul recognised them as members of the group of disciples and believers to which he himself belonged. However, they were defective members through a defect of knowledge. He explained to them the place of Jesus in their gospel hope, so that they then were baptised into His name and after St. Paul had laid his hands on them they received the Holy Spirit, with the outward manifestations of His presence. This incident should make us reflect on whether we have got the strands of the gospel message in their proper sequence.
More explicitly, what is the place of Jesus in the kingdom and so in the gospel? Briefly, it is that Jesus is Lord; He is the One who administers the rule of God. The judgement has been given to Him, together with all power in heaven and earth in order that all that the Father has given Him should be saved. He is not only Lord of God's kingdom in the coming judgement but He is already crowned Lord because He has overcome all the forces that oppose themselves to divine authority. This victory He won at Calvary, and it consisted of annulling the power of sin by undergoing the curse of sin and repulsing its temptations. So Jesus is Lord, and thus, Saviour, for He is able to save and justify from their sins all who come to God by Him. He is the one through whom forgiveness of sins is preached; for all who call upon Him as Lord will be saved, saved in the day of judgement, that is, saved now. Thus, the gospel message is to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus, for He died for our sins and rose again for our justification. This is a gracious reconciling message, for unless we sinners are reconciled to God through Jesus Christ we will be swept away like chaff in the day of the baptism of the Spirit and fire. The process has already begun. The Messiah is already seated as a refiner and purifier of His people. The message is "repent and believe the gospel" while it is still the day of salvation.

The gospel is the gospel of the kingdom. God is King and therefore Judge, because He is the righteous Creator. Jesus is King and Jesus is Judge, because He is the righteous Victor of Calvary. This victory is the supreme exercise of God's kingdom or rule (Psalm 2), a gracious rule for it annulled sin and its consequences for all who believe and translated believers from being under judgement to stand as sons and daughters in the Father's presence, through the gift of His Holy Spirit, which is Christ in us, the hope of glory, a glory which will be ours, when God's kingdom and rule fully come.

The gospel is about the rule of God. God exercised His rule when Jesus exercised His authority over satan, sin and death; God was in Christ. Jesus the Messiah is God with us, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Price of peace. So in preaching the gospel of the kingdom we must teach also the things concerning Jesus (Acts 38:31; 8:12) for the kingdom of God and the work of Christ are the same.
The gospel message then, is that God is ruling. He has made this very clear by the resurrection; and God's ruling means God's judgement which is only postponed for the moment. Therefore, repent, that is, change your way of life. Turn to God. Otherwise, when God's Holy Spirit comes like fire, that will be a baptism of the Spirit that will burn you up like chaff. But for those who are Christ's the judgement will be their vindication. Just as the farmer gathers the good wheat into the silo in contrast to the chaff which is blown away, so the Lord will gather His people into His presence and treasure them like jewels (Malachi 3:17-4:3).

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