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A Gospel Without a Future

An identifiable malaise has struck the theological enterprise. It has to do with the content of the Gospel itself. From the Jesus Seminar to evangelical tracts a common failure to define Jesus by his Kingdom message is evident. Theology at all levels continues to express its unease over the eschatological, Jewish Jesus who preached a Gospel about a coming Kingdom and judgment.

Members of the much-publicized "Jesus Seminar" have determined by vote that most of what Jesus is reported to have said in the Gospels never actually passed from his lips. Rather, his over-enthusiastic biographers attributed to him their own ideas and turned him into the bearer of Good News about the coming Kingdom. The real Jesus of history — so these scholars say — should be thought of in the category of wisdom-teacher, a figure much too calm and collected to have said anything alarmist or apocalyptic.

Evangelicals pride themselves on their firm grasp of the essentials of the Gospel of Jesus. But an examination of their writings shows that to a man they steer away from the awkward fact that Jesus preached as Gospel much more than a message about his death and resurrection. The statistics look like this: There are 25 chapters of Gospel preaching (Matt. 3-15; Mark 1-7; Luke 4-8), during which Jesus and the Apostles take the Gospel to the public, in which not a single word is said of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The Gospel, on this evidence, stands at that stage without the inclusion of any fact about the sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus. The case can be made even more impressively if we add that throughout Jesus' entire historical ministry the disciples, even when told, did not understand what was entailed in the death and resurrection of Jesus (see Luke 18:31-34). It follows then that the Gospel was at first a message about the coming Kingdom of God (97% of the Synoptic Kingdom texts plainly have to do with the inauguration of the Kingdom at the Parousia) and not about the death and resurrection of Jesus. These latter facts were added, after they happened, to the existing substratum of the Kingdom Gospel. Thus in Acts 8:12 the content of the Gospel put to the convert was "the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ."

While the Jesus Seminar tames the eschatological, Kingdom-oriented Jesus by the use of the critical axe and the consequent murder of Jesus' Gospel of the apocalyptic Kingdom texts, evangelicals who cannot espouse the "scholars'" technique of denying the sacred documents arrive at a similar result by a different method. They decide to define the Gospel of salvation on a carefully worked selective basis. By setting together certain isolated texts, mostly from the letters of Paul, or from one of Peter's sermons in Acts (2:22-29), they ignore the massive quantity of Gospel-data provided by the accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus. Thus Paul is made to appear the real author of the Gospel and the significance of Jesus is reduced to his death and resurrection. Jesus came, says a popular evangelist in a widely distributed tract, "to do three days work — to die, to be buried and to be raised." But this is obviously not true. It is a serious misrepresentation of

the Savior's own sense of his purpose. He declared in Luke 4:43 that he had come to "preach the Gospel about the Kingdom of God: that is the reason why I was commissioned." It was even possible for Jesus to say, before the crucifixion, that he had "completed the work" which the Father had assigned him (John 17:4). This work was the transmission of the Father's Gospel-Word to the disciples who were now charged to preserve and pass it on to others (John 17:6, 8, 20).

It ought not to be possible to claim the Great Commission as one's marching orders and then to propagate a Gospel shorn of its most fundamental element — the Kingdom of God. But this appears to be what evangelicals have done. No sooner have they read Matthew 28:19, 20, the Great Commission, than they leap to their favorite verses in Romans and Galatians, forgetting that Paul in his letters assumes a lot of Gospel information already held by his audience, for whom he was not presenting the Gospel for the first time.

A much sounder procedure would be to consult Luke's account of what Message Paul brought to the unconverted world — and here the testimony is more than clear. Paul, faithfully carrying out the mandate of the Great Commission to take the very Kingdom Gospel-words of Jesus to all nations, proceeded to enter the synagogue and continually speak out boldly, "reasoning, arguing and persuading about the Kingdom of God" (Acts 19:8). Summarizing his life's work for the Ephesian elders Paul recalled that he had everywhere urged repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus (Acts 20:21). He then supplied a concise definition of what this means. It was a solemn testifying to the "Gospel of the grace of God," in other words "the proclamation of the Kingdom" (Acts 20:24, 25).

In an effort to impress upon the world forever the nature of Paul's Gospel work, Luke leaves us with a final portrait of Paul and his typical preaching of salvation. Paul "solemnly testified about the Kingdom of God and tried to persuade them about Jesus," using the text of the Hebrew Bible, "from dawn till dusk" (Acts 28:23). The very same Kingdom Gospel of salvation was then taken to the Gentiles where Paul expected better results. We leave him in Rome "heralding the Kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered" (Acts 28:31).

Paul, then, did not just rehearse a few of his own sayings from the epistles in order to convey the saving Message. He deliberately imitated the Gospel preaching of the historical Jesus in fulfillment of the Great Commission. In fact, just as Jesus had "welcomed the people and begun speaking about the Kingdom of God" (Luke 9:11), Paul "welcomed all who came to him and heralded the Gospel of the Kingdom" (Acts 28:30, 31). The same cannot be said of modern evangelists who have dropped the phrase "Gospel of the Kingdom" from their vocabularies.

There is a very great danger that major elements of the Gospel can be eliminated if we rely on condensed statements from Paul's epistles. The method is flawed and the Gospel is distorted. Elements of the Gospel which do not fit into the "received" account of the Gospel ("what we have always preached") are quietly ignored and discarded.

As if to anticipate the catastrophic loss of Jesus' own Gospel Matthew, when he uses the noun "Gospel" (*evangelion*), always qualifies and defines it as the "Gospel about the Kingdom" (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14). In a verse designed before all others to lay out the quintessential Gospel, Mark records that Jesus urged the public to "Repent and believe the Gospel of the Kingdom" (Mark 1:14, 15). This is a programmatic summary of the Christian faith as Jesus perceived it. Luke records from the lips of Jesus that the Gospel concerns the Kingdom of God. It is this Message which summarizes the Son's preaching career (Luke 4:43; 16:16; cp. Acts 8:12; 28:23, 31). The "Roman Road," which falls for the trap of thinking that Paul's Gospel message can be gleaned from a few verses in the epistles, should be scrapped and replaced by "the Jesus' method" of evangelism, the announcement of the very Hebrew-based Gospel of the Kingdom coming. This, of course, will involve a much overdue rediscovery of the Hebrew prophets of Israel, for whose hope Paul, the Christian, was on trial (Acts 24:14; 26:6-8).

God's Gospel is the Gospel of the Kingdom (Mark 1:14, 15). Condensed, shorthand references to "the Gospel" need to be related always to the "parent" definition of the Gospel provided by the early chapters of the synoptic Gospels. But that is an area of Scripture which evangelicals and the Jesus Seminar dismiss, the latter by critical excision and the former by an uncanny avoidance of the plain, simple and obvious.

It seems most odd to raise the banner of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, 20 where Jesus says "Preach my Gospel" to everyone, Jew and Gentile, and then to skip the beginning of the teaching of Jesus entirely and take a gospel from individual verses in Paul, neglecting the critically important Gospel definition provided by Paul (in Acts 20:25). If the Christian church is serious about following Jesus and teaching everything he commanded, it would be common sense and sound theological method to turn over one page from Matthew 28:19, 20 and seek out the very first command of Jesus: "Repent and believe God's Gospel about the Kingdom" — a message which at that stage contained not a word about the death and resurrection of Jesus, added later.

Let Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom be "A." Let the sacrificial death and resurrection be "B." What business do evangelicals have substituting a part for the whole, separating "A" from "B" instead of adding "B" to "A" (as in Acts 8:12), and then starting with "A"?
