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The Gospel of the Kingdom



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The 1960s and 1970s in America witnessed a range of sweeping social and cultural changes. The sexual revolution, advances in civil rights, the rise of feminism, the early stages of the computer revolution, widespread judicial activism, and the emergence of postmodern thinking across a broad spectrum of issues are just a few of the landmarks of this period. These years also saw the rise of evangelicalism as a highly visible feature of American religious life. The sudden appearance—after two decades of build-up—of evangelical congregations, periodicals and publications, electronic media, burgeoning parachurch movements, and the first megachurches signaled the arrival of a new and widespread religious phenomenon on the American scene.

Among the primary characteristics of evangelicalism during this period was a far-ranging and variegated effort to proclaim the gospel to the nation—a mobilization for the work of evangelism on an unprecedented scale. During these years scores of thousands of pastors and lay people, young and old, were trained in methods of personal evangelism. World-renowned evangelists held campaigns in cities large and small all across the land. Campus ministries, outreaches to children, and citywide campaigns of various sorts flourished. These were the years of *Explo '72*, *Key '73*, "I Found It!" and lay witness

missions. Tens of millions of Americans heard the witness of a veritable army of evangelists, and multiplied millions—including this writer—professed faith in Christ. Well-known evangelical leaders heralded a coming revival and awakening. Even secular writers speculated that a “second reformation” might be at hand. As the decade of the 1970s drew to a close, major news periodicals proclaimed, “The Year of the Evangelical.” To many, it seemed as if the millennium was poised to arrive.

SPIRITUAL CROP FAILURE

What do we have to show today for this frenzy of evangelistic activity? What fruit can we identify in the church and in society to encourage us that our labors were not in vain in the Lord?

What is the state of the evangelical church in America today? As many writers have observed, evangelicalism is a movement divided at its core along doctrinal, ecclesiastical, liturgical, philosophical, and practical fault lines. We are a community whose morality has been described as a scandal by some of its clearest thinkers. Every year the evangelical church finds itself more marginalized with respect to issues of social and cultural change—speculations to the contrary emerging out of the last general election notwithstanding—while the nation continues its downward slide toward judgment. The evangelical landscape is perhaps most identifiable by a crop of mega-churches and mega-church wannabes, which some of their own leaders have described to me as “a mile wide and an inch deep,” but which continue to crank out materials and training to encourage and enable other congregations to become like them.

And as for our society and culture, they are awash in the relativism of postmodern and New Age thinking. Where we might have expected rivers of living water to be bringing righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit of God to all and every, instead, the flotsam and jetsam of materialism, sensualism, and mere individualism pollute the land. Our nation is trying very hard to turn its back against the verities of the American

past as its eyes continue scanning the uncertain horizons of the future, in search of something to live for.

Surely we might have expected something other than this as the millions of sixties and seventies confessors came of age in the neighborhoods, churches, marketplaces, and public squares of the nation.

ANOTHER GOSPEL?

We could doubtless cite a number of reasons for this spiritual crop failure: the widespread acceptance of postmodern thinking, the explosive spread of pop culture, increasing material prosperity, the breakdown of long-honored traditions and institutions, and so forth. But why should such social and cultural vicissitudes explain the doldrums into which evangelicalism has slipped? There must be another reason why the wind of God’s Spirit appears to blow so feebly and erratically in the sails of his church.

For decades evangelical and fundamentalist theologians railed against liberal and neo-orthodox preachers, teachers, and writers for promoting a gospel of half-truths at best. Claims that Jesus was to be revered primarily for his moral example, that the resurrection was to be understood as principally a psychological phenomenon, or that revelation was above all a subjective and existential reality were rightly and forthrightly exposed and condemned. Though they touched on truth and the message of the gospel, such claims, proffered as the most foundational elements of faith, undercut the Bible’s teaching and subverted the true good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. Any version of the gospel that distorts or misrepresents its central claims and teaching is in fact “another gospel” and must be resisted by resort to the whole truth of God. As the ranks thinned in mainline churches, and their influence in American culture and society declined during the 1960s and 1970s, evangelicals watched with evident satisfaction, sensing something like the judgment of God.

Are we willing to concede that perhaps that same judgment has consigned the evangelical church to the margins of society and culture today? Could it be that we, too, for all our

energetic exertions and good intentions, have been found guilty of preaching another gospel than the one that Jesus and Paul proclaimed?

THE GOSPEL OF PEACE AND JOY

The heart and core of the gospel offered to millions of Americans during the sixties and seventies was a message of God's love, expressed in the death and resurrection of Jesus, for the sake of delivering forgiveness and the assurance of eternal life for all who believed. We offered peace and joy to a generation ridden with guilt and plagued by uncertainty. Sermon after sermon, tract upon tract, faithfully-learned presentation after faithfully-learned presentation, what evangelicals proclaimed during those halcyon years was the good news that God will forgive our sins and grant us eternal life if only we will confess faith in Jesus Christ. God's wonderful plan was that we would go to heaven when we die; in the interim, we could live in peace and joy, free of guilt and confident of heaven, knowing that, having confessed Jesus as Savior, nothing would be able to pluck us out of the Father's hand.

The gospel of forgiveness and assurance—the gospel of peace and joy—remains the heart and core of the message proclaimed by preachers and evangelists across the spectrum of evangelicalism. Though today it is generally approached through the medium of story and with the assurance that God accepts us right where we are, at the end of the day those who “pray to receive Christ” are assured that their sins are forgiven, heaven is now their home, and God's unfailing grace will attend them through all the sins, trials, and travails they may endure in this life. They lay hold of a peace that has eluded them in the hope of knowing joy that nothing will be able to take away. And, as they suppose, having gained that peace and hopeful of that joy, they are reluctant to respond to any calls to die to self, yield to the power of the Spirit, and work out their salvation in the righteousness of God's holy law.

To be sure, evangelical churches make a good faith effort to teach much else besides the gospel of peace and joy—the nature of the spiritual life, the content of the Bible, the “how

to's” of a virtually unlimited category of practical skills. But the heart of the message, the good news we hold out to the world, is the gospel of forgiveness and assurance, the gospel of peace and joy. This is the appeal. This is what we proclaim. And this is what those who respond positively step forward to receive.

The problem is that this is decidedly *not* the gospel proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles.

THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

Certainly forgiveness and assurance, peace and joy, are included in the message Jesus taught, and which he instructed his apostles to proclaim. But these are not the sum and substance of that message. If anything, they are rather like the “first dividends” of grace for one who makes a lifelong, life-changing, all-inclusive investment—heart, mind, conscience, and strength—in the *real* gospel that Jesus and his apostles proclaimed.

That gospel is the *gospel of the kingdom*, the proclamation of a whole new reality, a new realm and quality of being, that has erupted within human history in the person of its eternal King, and is advancing ineluctably against all opposition to establish itself as the domain of righteousness, peace, and joy in those who receive it from his hand. While this good news includes the promise of peace and joy, these are offered to those who seek a *whole new way of life*, characterized by righteousness and discovered only in the indwelling Spirit of God—the gospel of the kingdom (Romans 14:17). The Jesus we are called to proclaim is not the meek and wan Savior, gently knocking on the door without a knob, a knapsack full of peace and joy on his back to be distributed to any who may have finally become disillusioned with the promises of materialism and sensuality. He is the King of Kings, mounted on a powerful white stallion, the sword of truth and arrows of conviction in his hand, as he rides forth, conquering and to conquer, across the pages of history to establish his reign of righteousness and truth in every nation (Psalm 45:3, 4; Revelation 6:1, 2). The first pagans to encounter his thrust and parry

understood the implications of the gospel of the kingdom, and feared lest their entire way of life should be turned upside down by its power (Acts 17:6). They persecuted, harried, and murdered the earliest believers because, as they shrieked at the martyrdom of Polycarp early in the second century, they recognized in the preachers of the gospel those who proclaimed a message that would destroy their precious gods.

This gospel of the kingdom was the *message* Jesus consistently declared to his astonished audiences (Matthew 4:17, 23). It was the focus of the Sermon on the Mount and the subject of the great majority of his parables. The gospel of the kingdom was the *mandate* Jesus issued to his followers (Luke 9:1, 2; Acts 1:1–4). Obedient to his command, the first apostles took the gospel of the kingdom to the streets of Jerusalem and the provinces and nations all around (Acts 2:32–36; 8:12). Since the kingdom of God is not, as Paul reminds us, *merely* peace and joy but *righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit*, the gospel we proclaim is less than complete if all these components are not included in our message, in the offer we hold forth, and in the commitment we seek. The presence of scores of millions claiming to know the peace and joy of Jesus must not lead us to conclude that the whole gospel, the gospel of the kingdom, has taken firm root in their hearts. For the absence of pervasive righteousness—defined in terms of glad obedience to the law of God—and the paucity of the kind of indwelling power that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we could ever ask or think, presently observable throughout the evangelical community, should lead us to suspect that the gospel many people are clinging to for peace and joy is something *other* than the gospel of the kingdom and its King.

Let pastors and church leaders scrutinize the gospel proclaimed and taught in their churches, and let the people of God consider whether they *truly* seek, and *eagerly* desire, the righteousness of God's law and the power of his Spirit that accompany lasting peace and unshakeable joy. Let us be completely honest concerning what we hold out to our congregations and what they desire of their salvation. For to embrace

Jesus *merely* for the purpose of gaining peace and joy, without also accepting the terms of righteousness and submission to the indwelling Spirit, in all his fullness, is to be misled, deceived, and, ultimately, deeply disappointed. It is to believe another gospel, and, as we shall perhaps one day discover to our great dismay, it is to believe in vain.

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