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# Exegesis 8: The Gospel of the Kingdom

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*Archie Boyd*

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*There is one gospel in all Scripture and the heart of that gospel is Christ as the Scriptures reveal him. This article is an extract from Principal Boyd's paper on 'The Content of the Gospel' given at the BEC Study Conference in 1987. By considering the text of **Matthew 4:23** it demonstrates the relationship between the gospel and the kingdom.*

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In this verse Jesus' ministry in Galilee is described as 'teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom'. Again and again throughout the Synoptic Gospels Jesus' preaching is described in these terms, e.g. Matthew 9:35 and Luke 8:1. (Sometimes the kingdom is referred to as kingdom of God, sometimes kingdom of Heaven. There is no ground for making a distinction in meaning between these two descriptions). In Luke 4:43 Jesus is recorded as saying 'It is necessary for me to preach the kingdom of God in other villages also for this purpose was I sent.' The parabolic teaching which accounts for so much of his public preaching is regularly introduced by some such phrase as, 'The kingdom of heaven is like...'. When we compare the accounts of Jesus' own explanation of the key parable of the sower given in Luke and Matthew we find that the word of God (Luke 8:11) is equivalent to the word of the kingdom (Matthew 13:18).

In Acts, Luke is telling us that in the period between the resurrection and ascension Jesus is still speaking to his disciples 'about the kingdom of God' (Acts 1:3). Philip's preaching in Samaria is described as 'preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God and of the name of Jesus Christ' (Acts 8:12). It has also to be noted that although Paul does not in his Epistles use the terms 'kingdom of God' or 'kingdom of heaven', Luke describes Paul's three-month ministry in the Synagogue at Ephesus in terms of 'arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God' (Acts 19:8 NIV). Twice over in Acts 28, verse 23 and verse 31, Luke describes Paul's ministry in Rome in similar terms. Nor can it be concluded that this description of Paul's preaching is relevant only when Paul is addressing Jews. We would rightly conclude in the light of his own application of the Isaiah prophecy, recorded in verses 26-28, that during these two years his hearers were largely Gentile. And with reference to the ministry at Ephesus we have his own testimony when later he speaks to the Ephesian elders at Miletus and reminds them of his ministry to both Jews and Greeks. This ministry he describes first as a call 'to repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ' (Acts 20:21) and then as 'preaching the kingdom'. Here in Acts we have witness from both Luke and Paul himself that his gospel was the gospel of the kingdom just as Christ's was. And although Paul in his Epistles, when he describes his gospel, does not use the synoptic kingdom terminology we, in the light of the statements in Acts, are justified in under-

standing him as setting forth the same gospel of the kingdom as we find in Jesus<sup>™</sup> (and John the Baptist's and Philip's) preaching.

We see therefore that throughout the New Testament the gospel is presented as **the gospel of the kingdom**. What is the significance of this description?

When John as Jesus' forerunner came calling for repentance because the kingdom of God had come near (Matthew 3:2) and when Jesus himself takes up the same message (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:14,15), and subsequently sends out the twelve to the lost sheep of the house of Israel to declare the same message (Matthew 10:7), they were obviously using language that had some meaning for their hearers. Their contemporaries to whom they spoke had some expectation of a kingdom. That expectation may have taken a variety of forms due to a whole range of different influences. The expectations may have been wrong in all sorts of ways. But Jesus was confirming that it was not wrong to expect a kingdom. Further, he was saying that the kingdom had drawn near, or even, had come, and had drawn near or come in such a way that the appropriate response was repentance and belief, and that that was his gospel. When, subsequent to his resurrection and in the light of his exaltation, Jesus commissioned his disciples to go, not just to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but unto all the world it was with the same gospel.

The description of the gospel as the gospel of the kingdom is the most comprehensive description we have. It says so much. **Everything else that we may point to in Scripture as belonging to the content of the gospel is comprehended in this description.** For that reason we can here do little more than list some main points.

When we go back to Jesus' first preaching the gospel of the kingdom we hear him say, 'The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has drawn near (or has come)' (Mark 1:15). Here we are deliberately refusing to be dogmatic about the translation of '*engiken*'. If to translate it as 'has come' bound one to a concept that left no room for any future coming we would, of course, have to reject it as flying in the face of the clear teaching of other Scriptures: but it does not. 'Has drawn near' has much to commend it in the light of the sense the verb '*engizo*' regularly has. But if that translation was used to undermine the idea of what has actually come into being we would have to protest. That '*engiken*' here is accompanied (in a way in which it is not in John's proclamation in Matthew 3:2) by *peplerotai* is not to be overlooked. Together they speak of actual fulfilment, accomplished reality.

### **Fulfilment**

Fulfilment here indicates the coming to pass of what God promised. This idea of fulfilment as a present reality runs all through the New Testament. The fulfilment may have been very different from what many of the Jewish people were looking for. It may even have puzzled John the Baptist as it ran its course, or, to John, seemed not to run the expected course. But Jesus' answer to John and his words to the crowds about John and what was happening since John's ministry had ended, only emphasise the fulfilment that has actually taken place.

### **Theocentric**

Jesus' words emphasise that it is God who is at work. The kingdom is what God himself has done. It is the fulfilment of prophecy such as Isaiah 64:1.

## **Manifestation of God's Power, the Exercise of God's Authority and Rule**

It is true that Scripture does encourage us to think of the kingdom in terms of a state that can be entered into, in terms of a possession to be enjoyed, even in terms of a spatial, material realm. Yet in the primary sense the kingdom of God is the divine kingly dominion exercising itself. Jesus' own explanation of the significance of his casting out demons (Matthew 12:28, Mark 3:27, Luke 11:20) is only one of the ways in which Jesus makes this clear. It is the truth Paul highlights when he says, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God to salvation' (Romans 1:16) and when in the next verse he says that 'in it the righteousness of God is revealed.' Paul's use of the verb *'apokalupto* here as elsewhere means not just the bringing into view, but rather the effective, mighty demonstration in action.

## **The Kingdom Come in the Person of Jesus as the Messiah**

When John the Baptist came preaching that the kingdom had drawn near he pointed away from himself (Matthew 3:11, John 1:19-27, 29-33). When Jesus comes speaking about the kingdom as having come he points to himself (Matthew 12:28, Luke 11:20). The meaning of the kingdom of God in Jesus' preaching cannot be answered without reference to the question, Who is Jesus? It is in this light that we are to understand Jesus' words to the disciples in answer to their question about his teaching in parables. When he said 'To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God' (Luke 8:10, cf Mark 4:10) Jesus was not speaking about anything other than the fact that they had been given to recognise who he himself was and had received him. Not matter what was lacking in their understanding and faith, they had come to know who he was. He himself is the 'mystery' — the truth of God now revealed and in action. In exactly the same vein Paul writes in Colossians 2:2. In the same way we are to understand Galatians 1:11. Paul is not just saying that he received his gospel by a revelation from Jesus Christ but through Jesus Christ being revealed to him (cf verse 16). The gospel is the gospel of the glory of Christ, 2 Corinthians 4:4.

It is true that Jesus did not use the designation 'the Christ' of himself during his earthly ministry and forbade others to proclaim him by this term. He had reasons for so doing, based partly, at least, on false conceptions of the Messiah. But there is absolutely no doubt he saw himself as the Messiah and led his disciples to confess him as such and accepted that confession (Matthew 16:16). **It is because he is the Messiah that the kingdom has come.** The New Testament speaks with one voice with the Old in that the coming of the Messiah is essential to the kingdom of God. The concepts of Kingdom of God and Messiah are inseparable. So much of the contents of the early chapters of Luke make this so very clear and the identity is reaffirmed throughout the New Testament as it takes up and expounds the Old.

## **Two-Fold Significance**

Throughout the preaching of the prophets of the old dispensation the coming of the Messiah, the coming of the kingdom, has a two-fold significance. Isaiah 61, from which Jesus read and which he declared fulfilled in his preaching in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21), is typical. The year of the Lord's favour is the day of vengeance of our God. The same two-fold note is found in John the Baptist's preaching (Matthew 3:11-12). In the light of the totality of John's testimony to Jesus his reference

to Jesus baptising with 'fire' is not to be taken as explicatory of the baptism with the Holy Spirit, but as a prediction of judgment. In Matthew 3, verse 12 is to be taken as indicating what the baptism with fire involves. This two-fold aspect of the coming of the kingdom is seen in Jesus' ministry. It is true that judgment is not immediately or finally executed. That caused problems for John, as we have seen. To others too it seemed inconceivable that the kingdom could in any sense have come before the great judgment. But the element of judgment is already clearly there in Jesus' ministry. The demons were aware of that. 'Are you come before the time to destroy us?', they asked. The intensity of Satan's attacks on Jesus is to be understood in the light of his knowing that failure to tempt Jesus away from obedience meant judgment for him. Jesus' words in John 12:31 are highly important.

Jesus' words and actions demonstrate that the coming of the kingdom in him brings blessing. The Son of Man (completely identified with the Messiah in Jesus' teaching) has power 'on earth' here and now to forgive sin (Mark 2:10). As Jesus sends back the messengers sent by John to report to John what they had seen and heard John is having his attention focussed on the present blessing of the kingdom. At the same time John is reminded of the enigma that is the coming of the kingdom in Jesus (Luke 7:23). To all sorts of people Jesus is a stumbling-block. To some at one time because he did not bring judgment. Later to others because of the judgment demonstrated in himself. The coming of the kingdom in the person of Jesus throws men and demons into crises. Its coming marks the fulfilment of the promises of salvation. It also means judgment for all who are the enemies of the king; for Satan and for all who belong to him. It calls for decision, for repentance and faith.

### **Present and Future**

Much of what we have already referred to indicates that with Jesus' coming the kingdom is a present reality. But is not a perfected reality. Perfection lies in the future. Even between the period of Christ's earthly ministry and the sending out of the Apostles into all the world after Pentecost there is development. John pointed to Jesus not only as the one who was baptised with the Holy Spirit but as the one who would baptise with the Holy Spirit (John 1:32). When the risen, exalted Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit John's prediction is fulfilled and with that there is a further stage of development of the kingdom. The disciples are equipped to take the gospel of the kingdom into all the world. Still the consummation lies in the future.

In all sorts of ways the coming perfection of the kingdom is referred to in the preaching of Jesus and the Apostles. In direct prediction (e.g. Matthew 7:21, 24:30-31, 25:31, Luke 13:22-30, 17:20-24) and by use of parables (Matthew 13:24-30, Matthew 13:47-50) Jesus points to the consummation. What Jesus points to in such sayings is taken up by the Apostles. Its certainty is the basis of exhortation to faithful service, perseverance, and endurance (1 Timothy 6:14, 1 Peter 1:3-6, 1 Thessalonians 1:4-10, Titus 2:13).

When all the predictions and descriptions of the future manifestation and consummation of the kingdom are studied we find that there is nothing essentially

new. It is all based on, and is the outcome and the full flourishing of, what has already been brought into being with the kingdom as already manifest in the coming, the life, the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. It is highly significant that the same term *'epiphaneia'* is used of what we call 'the first coming' and 'the second coming' of Christ (2 Timothy 1:10 and 1 Timothy 6:14, 2 Timothy 4:1,8, Titus 2:13, 2 Thessalonians 2:8 respectively). **It is more accurate to speak of one coming in two stages.** As the kingdom was manifest when Christ came to earth, so its consummation comes with the revelation — revelation in the sense of active demonstration — of his glory at the end of time. Then the two-fold aspect of the kingdom, salvation and judgment will have their final manifestation (John 5:27-29, Romans 16:20, 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10). The reference in John 5 speaks of the resurrection of good and evil. The predictions of the future gave us no detail about the nature of the resurrection bodies of those outside Christ, but again and again the importance of the resurrection bodies of the redeemed is emphasised. Their qualities are spelled out in detail in 1 Corinthians 15:35-37. Their quality and their connection with Christ's glorified body are referred to in Philippians 3:21 and that connection with Christ's resurrection referred to again and again (eg 1 Corinthians 15:23).

These predictions of the future manifestation and consummation of the kingdom include the transformation, renewal and bringing into harmony of all creation. There are many direct statements to this effect, Ephesians 1:10, Colossians 1:20, Romans 8:19-22, 2 Peter 2:7-13. In these statements this renewal, reconciliation, this bringing all things into harmony, are accomplished in Christ. As the first Adam was made in God's image, for Adam to glorify and enjoy God in his creation, so God has given his Son to be the second Adam and in him there is secured 'the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 1:11) in which those who are in him renewed in the image of God will glorify and enjoy him in a creation into which sin will never again be permitted to enter (Matthew 13:40-43, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Revelation 21-27).

**It is this kingdom in all its final perfection that Jesus taught us to pray for.** The name by which he taught us to draw near to God and the first three petitions of the Lord's prayer are inseparably connected. It is his own eternal, saving, reconciling purpose revealed in the title 'Our Father in heaven' and the fact that that purpose has already been fulfilled in the One who teaches us so to pray that makes it possible for us to take up these following petitions knowing that they shall be answered. In the answer God's glory and our blessing will be conjoined. He who taught us to pray is the one who also assures those who believe in him, 'Don't be afraid, little flock, because the Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom' (Luke 12:32).

*Principal A C Boyd MA BD is Principal of the Free Church College, Edinburgh*