

# LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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## THE ESSENTIAL CONTENT OF THE N T GOSPEL

Stephen Prothero, author of *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*, wrote: "U.S. citizens know almost nothing about the Bible. Although most regard it as the word of God, few read it anymore. Even evangelicals from the Bible Belt seem more focused on loving Jesus than on learning what he had to say. In a religious literacy quiz I have administered to undergraduates for the last two years, students tell me that Moses was blinded on the road to Damascus and Paul led the Israelites on the exodus out of Egypt. Surveys that are scientific have found that only one of three U.S. citizens is able to name the four gospels, and one of ten think that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. No wonder publisher George Gallup has concluded that the United States is 'a nation of biblical illiterates.'" In this article we will change Prothero's title to read "*What Every Church Member Needs to Know—and Doesn't is: the essential content of the New Testament Gospel is the Kingdom of God.*"

A quote from a Billy Graham Gospel tract written by Roy Gustafson entitled *What is the Gospel?* states the common views about the content of the New Testament Gospel: "If you read the epistles of Paul, you will notice the message centers in three things: the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Christ. As far as Paul was concerned, Christ Jesus came to do three days' work: the work was commenced when he was nailed on the cross and was ended when God raised him from among the dead. Paul never discussed the earthly life of our lord—his baptism, his temptation, his miracles, his teachings, or even his sufferings in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is quite in keeping with the rest of the New Testament, for we must remember that Christ came not primarily to preach the gospel (though he did herald deliverance to the prisoner), but he came rather that there might be a gospel to preach. This gospel was won and brought into being by his work on the cross." If this tract is true, then the Scriptures that declare Christ "preached the gospel of the kingdom" are false, and it is a denial of Luke 4:43: "Jesus said to them, 'I must proclaim the gospel of the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose.'"

The two quotes below, taken from a previous issue of *The Living Waters Newsletter* illustrate the dearth of preaching on the gospel of the kingdom: Charles Taber, Professor Emeritus of World Mission, Emanuel School of Evangelism, Johnson City, Tenn. is quoted in *Focus on the Kingdom* as saying: "I read with the greatest interest the nine statements attempting to answer the question, 'What is the Gospel?' I am amazed and dismayed to find not even a passing mention of the theme which was the core of Jesus' Gospel in three of the four accounts: the Kingdom of God. Every one of these statements reflects the individualistic reduction of the gospel that plagues American evangelicalism." Peter Wagner, the father of the modern church growth movement, in his book *Church Growth and the Whole Gospel* wrote: "I honestly cannot remember any pastor whose ministry I have been under actually preaching a sermon on the Kingdom of God...I now realize I have never preached a sermon on it. Where has the Kingdom been?"

When reading the Gospels, Acts, and the Epistles, we told over and over what Jesus, the early church and the Apostles preached. Their message was the essential content of the New Testament—the gospel of the Kingdom. Why is this important? The simple answer is Romans 10:17: "So faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." The reason the modern religious world is so ignorant of the gospel of the kingdom is they have never heard it preached. They have heard much about walking the streets of gold in heaven with Christ when we die, they have never been exposed to what the essential content of gospel of the New Testament really is. If we set aside the churches in which the preacher's messages are a theology of psychology and well-being with messages that are easy going and entertaining without any mention kingdom of God, judgment, sin or repentance, rather a healthy dose of positive thinking. Further, consider the message of the so-called fundamentalist Bible believing evangelical preaching today, we still hear little about the kingdom of God. In these circles outside the contemporary, up to date and so-called relevant preaching of today, we hear much about being born again, man's need of salvation, and Jesus as a ransom for sin, and building the church. Jesus certainly spoke about these things, and they are Scriptural and important, but none of these themes were the theme of the message of Jesus. The new birth is only mentioned one time. This was in his conversation with Nicodemus. He mentions his dying as a ransom for us only one time (Matt. 20:28), and only used the word "salvation" in very few passages. He mentions the word "church" only two times (Matt. 16:18, 18:17). In contrast there are nearly a hundred references to the Kingdom of God in the gospels alone. When Jesus sent the Apostles out to preach he instructed them to preach *the Kingdom of God*: "as you go, preach saying 'the kingdom of God is at hand'" (Matt. 10:7), "He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to perform healing" (Luke 9:2), "...heal those who are sick, and say unto them 'the kingdom of God has come near to you'" (Luke 10: 9). The preaching of the kingdom of God was so important that Jesus instructed a man to "let the dead bury the dead, but you go everywhere and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:60). The apostles followed this example in the preaching of Acts and the Epistles. The book of Revelation also has something to say about the kingdom of God.

Didn't Paul say that the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus was the gospel he preached to them and that "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received"? (I Cor. 15:1-3). The literal translation of verse three is: "For I delivered to you *among the first things* what also I received..." As crucial and integral as the death, burial and resurrection of Christ are to the Gospel, they are not the whole Gospel. These truths are *among* others that Paul proclaimed. If the first message of Jesus was the kingdom of God, then Paul's message must have contained this truth. The book of Acts verifies this: Paul "...continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God" (Acts 19:8). On his way to Jerusalem Paul told the elders at Ephesus: "I do not consider my life of any account as

dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. And now I know that you all, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will see my face no more...for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God" (Acts 20:24-27). These verses show that "the gospel of the grace of God" and the "preaching of the kingdom" were the same thing and are summed up in verse 27 as being "the whole purpose of God." When imprisoned in Rome Paul "testified about the kingdom of God" and "preached the kingdom of God" (Acts 28:23,31). The Jews did not accept his message, so he said, "Let it be known to you therefore, that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles" (ver. 28). This equates "this salvation of God" with "the Gospel of the Kingdom."

We will now quote (not just list) the following texts, some are mentioned above, that describe the ministry of Christ and the Apostles:

Luke 4:43-44: "Jesus said to them, 'I must proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to the other cities also *for I was sent for this purpose.*' So he kept proclaiming the Gospel in the synagogues of Judea."

Mark 1:14-15: "Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the Gospel of God and saying, 'the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the Gospel'."

Matthew 4:23: "Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom."

Matthew 6:33: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you."

Matthew 9:35: "Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom."

Matthew 13:19: "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart."

Matthew 24:14: "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and the end will come."

Luke 4:3-44: "He said to them. 'I must preach the gospel of the kingdom of God to other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose.' So he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea."

Luke 8:1: "Soon afterwards, he began going around from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him."

Luke 10:8, 12: "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables...Those beside the road are those who have heard, then the Devil comes and takes away the word (of the kingdom, Matt. 13:19) from their heart, so they will not believe and be saved."

Luke 9:2: "He sent them out to proclaim the Gospel of God...They began going throughout the villages preaching the Gospel."

Acts 1:3, 6: "The resurrected Christ was "speaking of things concerning the kingdom of God...So when they had come together, they were asking him. 'Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom of Israel?'"

Acts 8:12: "When they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, both men and women."

Acts 14:21, 22: "After they had preached the Gospel in that city and had made many disciples, they returned...strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.'"

Acts 19:8: Paul "Entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God."

Acts 20:25: "And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face."

Acts 28:23: "When they had set a date for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers, and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God..."

Acts 28:30, 31: "And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ."

Rom. 14:17: "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

I Cor 4:20: "For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power."

I Thess. 2:12: "God calls you into his kingdom and glory."

Heb. 12:28: "Therefore, since we receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude ..."

James 2:5 "Did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which He promised to those who love Him?"

These passages show us the gospel Jesus and the Apostles preached was not a message telling us how to get to heaven, rather it is a message concerning the Kingdom of God. Some time ago in a syndicated column *In My Opinion*, written in the name of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, stated: "Jesus Christ came for one reason: to make it possible for us to go to heaven when we die. Jesus came to take us to heaven forever." The Bible does not say this. His reason was to make us "a kingdom, priest to his God and Father!" (Rev. 1:5). What has happened? E. Stanley Jones says it well in *The Unshakable Kingdom*: "The greatest loss that has ever come to the Christian movement in its long course in history was the loss of the kingdom. For the thing Jesus called the Good News, the Gospel, has been lost. Not silenced but 'lost in the directive of the movement. The Christian movement went riding off in all directions without goal and without power to move that goal. The substitutes became the goal. The church became the kingdom, the church with all its manufactured claims of infallibility. The reaction to all this was the kingdom became a refuge to hold against the world leaving a crippled result."