

# Dispensationalism: Canceling the Teaching of Jesus

by Anthony Buzzard

For schools of theology committed to believing the authoritative word of Scripture, there are other ways of circumventing the Gospel of the Kingdom. One popular Gospel tradition has erected a scheme by which the Gospel of the Kingdom is specifically *not* the Gospel of salvation now to be offered to potential believers. It is a system known as “dispensationalism.” All students of the Bible recognize that God appointed different “dispensations” or arrangements for different periods of history. The Mosaic dispensation, for example, made demands on the faithful different from those required under the New Testament Gospel. But “dispensationalism” goes much further. It maintains that the Gospel of the Kingdom was preached by Jesus to Jews only, until they refused the offer of the Kingdom; whereupon a different Gospel, the Gospel of grace, was introduced by Paul. The theory then holds that the Gospel of the Kingdom will be reinstated seven years before the return of Christ, a time when, according also to dispensationalism, the Church will have been removed from the earth by the so-called “pretribulation rapture.”<sup>1</sup>

The dispensationalist system has been forced upon the text of Scripture in the interests of a theory alien to the Bible. As we have pointed out, Luke went to great lengths to show that Paul’s Gospel was not different from that of Jesus. Both men preached the Gospel about the Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Paul, contrary to dispensationalism, knew nothing about a difference between “the Gospel of grace” (Acts 20:24) and “preaching the Kingdom” (Acts 20:25). He deliberately equates them. As F.F. Bruce says: “It is evident from a comparison of this verse [Acts 20:24] with the next that the preaching of this Gospel [of grace] is identical with the proclamation of the Kingdom...The proclaiming of the Kingdom is the same as testifying to the good news of God’s grace.”<sup>3</sup> This incontrovertible evidence is flatly contradicted by contemporary dispensationalism. Dr. Erwin Lutzer, of Moody Church Radio Ministries, states: “I believe that the gospel of the kingdom is different from the gospel of the grace of God...The gospel of the grace of God has nothing to do with the Kingdom per se.”<sup>4</sup> But this confusing of the one saving Gospel was learned from tradition unexamined, not from the Bible. By positing “two forms of the Gospel,” dispensationalists have invented a most unfortunate distinction which does not exist in the scriptural text.

Dispensationalism formally cancels the Gospel as Jesus preached it. Could the Church have suffered a greater disaster than this systematic curtailing of Jesus’ own Gospel preaching? A.C. Gaebelien was a leading exponent of the “divided Gospel” theory. Referring to Jesus’ words in Matthew 24:14, “This Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world to all the nations,” he wrote:

The preaching which is mentioned is that of the Gospel of the Kingdom, but that Gospel is not now preached, for we preach the Gospel of Grace...With that event [the stoning of

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus spoke about gathering the elect Christians *after* (i.e., post) the tribulation (Matt. 24:29-31; the elect, of course, are the Christians: see Matt. 22:14, where “chosen” represents the same Greek word “elect”). He also urged his followers to expect their redemption *after* the cataclysmic events leading to the end of the age (Luke 21:28). Since Jesus instructed his followers to “flee to the hills” at the onset of the tribulation, it should be obvious that he had no departure to heaven in mind! Paul expected Christians to have to survive until the public manifestation of Jesus in power and glory (2 Thess. 1:7-9). He expressly warned against any system which taught that Christians would be gathered together before the appearance of the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:1-4).

<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:43, etc.; Acts 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31.

<sup>3</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Eerdmans, 1975, p. 379-380.

<sup>4</sup> From correspondence, Oct., 1996.

Stephen] the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom ceased. Another Gospel was preached. The Lord gave it to the great Apostle, whom He called Himself, Paul. And Paul calls this Gospel “my Gospel.” It is the Gospel of God’s free Grace to all who believe, the gospel of the Glory of God, the Gospel of a risen and glorified Lord...Now during the time that the Kingdom was preached to be at hand the Gospel of Grace was not heard, and during the time the Gospel of Grace is preached *the Gospel of the Kingdom is not preached*.<sup>5</sup>

By this extraordinary exegetical blunder, Jesus’ Christian Gospel of the Kingdom was ruled out of court — dismissed as suspended, and decreed impermissible for the present time. The situation would seem to call for a profound repentance and the reinstatement of Jesus’ full Gospel at the heart of evangelism. Can there be such a thing as evangelism which does not hold in highest honor and emphasis the very Gospel heralded by Jesus and mandated by the Great Commission until the end of the age? If Paul had in fact preached, as Gaebelein says, “another Gospel,” he would have put himself under his own curse (Gal. 1:8-9). He would have been in violation of Jesus’ instructions that *his* teachings were to go to the entire world.

The article on “Gospel” in *Unger’s Dictionary of the Bible* represents the same common dispensationalist tendency to bypass the Gospel as Jesus preached it. This kind of thinking about the Gospel and salvation has had an immense influence particularly in America, but its effects are felt throughout the evangelical world:

Forms of the Gospel to be differentiated. Many Bible teachers make a distinction in the following:

(1) *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. The Good News that God’s purpose is to establish an earthly mediatorial kingdom in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:16). Two proclamations of the gospel of the kingdom are mentioned, one already past, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist, carried on by our Lord and His disciples and *ending with the Jewish rejection of the Messiah*. The other preaching is yet future (Matt. 24:14), during the Great Tribulation, and heralding the second advent of the King...

(2) *The Gospel of God’s Grace*...The good news of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ as provided by our Lord and preached by His disciples (1 Cor. 15:1-4).<sup>6</sup>

The tragic suppression of the Gospel of the Kingdom is evident in the Scofield Study Bible at Revelation 14:6. The system of Gospel definition described in this note has affected the entirety of evangelical presentation of salvation, even where Scofield is not specifically recognized. Scofield begins by defining the saving Gospel as the Gospel of the grace of God which, he maintains, is confined to facts about the death and resurrection of Jesus. Scofield then goes on to say that “another aspect of the good news is the gospel ‘of the Kingdom’...The good news of this kingdom was announced...by Christ in His first coming (Matt. 9:35), and will be proclaimed during the great tribulation” (Matt. 24:14). Scofield thus banishes the Gospel of the Kingdom from the present message of salvation by stating that the Christian Gospel *now is only about Jesus’ atoning death and his resurrection*. In this way Jesus is cut off from his own Gospel preaching. We may well observe that Satan’s master trick is to separate Jesus from his teaching. One may proclaim “Jesus” with all earnestness, but is the real Jesus made known apart from his complete Gospel and teaching? Jesus well knew the danger of preaching “faith in Jesus” without actually telling the public about the “words of Jesus.” Only those whose faith is founded on the rock foundation of the

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<sup>5</sup> *The Olivet Discourse*, Baker Book House, 1969, pp. 9, 39, 40, emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> Merrill F. Unger, *The New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, Moody Bible Institute, 1988, p. 420, emphasis added.

teachings/Gospel of Jesus are on solid ground (Matt. 7:24-27; Mark 8:35-38; and see the whole Gospel of John with its constant insistence on the word/words/teaching of Jesus).

Uncertainty about the Christian Gospel is not surprising when such evident misreading of the Bible is built into a system with a massive influence in pulpits and Christian literature. Surely the words of Paul in Acts 20:24-25 should banish the artificial distinction proposed by the Bible Dictionary and the Scofield Bible. Paul looked back on his career and noted that he had “finished his course, the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus to testify solemnly of **the Gospel of the grace of God**...to all of you among whom I went about **preaching the Kingdom.**” *Clearly there is no difference between the Gospel of grace and the Gospel of the Kingdom.* It is true, of course, that Jesus did not initially preach his death and resurrection as part of the Gospel. The death and resurrection of Jesus were later critical elements in the proclamation of Paul. They did not, however, replace the preaching of the Kingdom, which remained as much the heart of Paul’s Gospel as it had been the center of Jesus’ own Message.

When Jesus embarked on his intensive evangelistic campaign in Galilee in about 27 AD, he summoned his audience to a radical change of heart based on the national belief that God was going to usher in the worldwide Kingdom promised by Daniel and all the prophets. Intelligent belief in the promise of the Kingdom is to be the disciple’s first step, coupled with a major U-turn in lifestyle. In this way men and women can align themselves with God’s great purpose for the earth.

The nature of Jesus’ activity was that of a herald making a public announcement on behalf of the one God of Israel. The thrust of the Message was that each individual should undertake a radical redirection of his life in face of the certainty of the coming Kingdom of God. This was, and still is, the essence of the Christian Gospel. How can it be otherwise, when it is the Gospel Message which comes from the lips of the Messiah himself?

It is a matter of common sense to recognize that by using the term “Kingdom of God,” Jesus would have evoked in the minds of his audience, steeped as they were in the national hope of Israel, a divine worldwide government on earth, with its capital at Jerusalem. This is what the Kingdom of God would certainly have meant to his contemporaries. The writings of the prophets, which Jesus as a Jew recognized as the divinely authorized word of God, had unanimously promised the arrival of a new era of peace and prosperity. The ideal Kingdom would rule forever. God’s people would be victorious on a renewed earth. Peace would extend across the globe.

Thus to announce the coming of the Kingdom involved both a threat and a promise. To those who responded to the Message by believing it and reordering their lives accordingly, there was a promise of a place in the glories of the future divine rule. To the rest the Kingdom would threaten destruction, as God executed judgment upon any not found worthy of entering the Kingdom when it came. This theme governs the whole New Testament. In the light of this primary concept the teaching of Jesus becomes comprehensible. It is an exhortation to win immortality in the future Kingdom and to escape destruction and exclusion from the Kingdom.

Traditional systems of Gospel preaching are saddled with the unbiblical destiny of the believer described as “heaven.” The Abrahamic covenant which underlies the Christian Gospel of the Kingdom is then applied to Jews only! But it is the *Christians* who according to Jesus are destined to “inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5) and the Kingdom.

## The Sermon on the Mount

Christians should awake to the fact that their various traditional systems, claiming to be based on Scripture, have not served them well. Scripture nowhere says that Jesus preached a Jewish message up to the cross; whereupon Paul then took a message of grace to the Gentiles. A false distinction and division is being created by the so-called “dispensationalist” school. The teachings of Jesus do not remain at the center of the scheme of salvation proposed by dispensationalists. John Walvoord says that the Sermon on the Mount:

treats not of salvation, but of the character and conduct of those who belong to Christ...Its intent is clearly not to delineate the gospel that Jesus Christ died and rose again, or present justification by faith. Nor is its purpose to point an unbeliever to salvation in Christ...The Sermon on the Mount, as a whole, is not church truth precisely.<sup>7</sup>

Rather ambiguously he adds that it should not be “relegated to unimportant truth.”<sup>8</sup>

The words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount could hardly express more clearly that obedience to his teachings *are* in fact the basis of salvation: “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the religious teachers and Pharisees, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven [i.e., be saved]” (Matt. 5:20). “Not everyone who says to me, ‘lord, lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven; rather it is those who do the will of my Father” (Matt. 7:21). Jesus goes on to say that those who fail to gain salvation are those who fail to obey his words (Matt. 7:24-27).<sup>9</sup> And this is, in the words of Walvoord, “not church truth precisely”?

Until churches renounce the disparagement of the teaching of Jesus implied in their various systems, we cannot hope for unity. We must rally around the great central theme of the Gospel of the Kingdom, which expresses the genius of the Christian faith and brings us close to the heart of Jesus. L.S. Chafer’s distinction drawn between what some label the “legal” teachings of Jesus and the grace message of Paul seems to us to be entirely mistaken:

Under the conditions laid down in the kingdom teachings, life is entered into by a personal faithfulness (Matt. 5:28-29; 18:8-9; Luke 10:25-28). When this same exhortation is stated in the Gospel by Luke (13:24), it opens with the words, “Strive to enter in at the narrow gate.” The word *strive* is a translation of *agonizomai*, which means “agonize.” It suggests the uttermost expenditure of the athlete’s strength in the contest. Such is the human condition that characterizes all the kingdom passages which offer entrance into life. An abrupt change is met after turning to the Gospel by John, which was written to announce the new message of grace, which is, that eternal life may be had by *believing*. No two words of Scripture more vividly express the great characterizing relationships in law and grace than *agonize*, and *believe*. Grace is the unfolding of the fact that One has agonized in our stead, and life is “through His Name,” and not by any degree of human faithfulness or merit.<sup>10</sup>

While dispensationalism upholds the authority and integrity of Scripture, it proceeds to divide the Apostles against each other, making John and Paul rivals of Jesus. It makes the Kingdom Gospel of Jesus, by which salvation is to be sought,<sup>11</sup> of historical interest only, since the message was changed, according to the theory, at the cross. It is simply not true that “believing” is a new idea in the Gospel of John and in Paul. Believing the Gospel of the Kingdom of God is the platform of Jesus’ presentation of the saving message in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (John refers constantly to the “word” and “words” of Jesus), and Paul likewise traces all sound faith to belief in the “message of Messiah” (Rom. 10:17).

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<sup>7</sup> *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come*, Moody Press, 1984, pp. 44, 45.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> Cp. John 3:36; 8:51; 12:44-50.

<sup>10</sup> L.S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-48, Vol. IV, p. 224.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 1:14, 15; Matt. 13:19; Luke 8:12; Acts 8:12; 19:8; 28:23, 31.