

“This rich collection of essays combats the shallowness of much of our thinking and rhetoric about evangelicalism. *Whatever Happened to Evangelicalism?* brings the best in contemporary scholarship to bear on the timely question of what it means to be evangelical. It deserves a wide reading and thoughtful discussion.”

—Donald A. Yerxa
Editor, *Fides et Historia*
Emeritus Professor of History, Eastern Nazarene College

“*Whatever Happened to Evangelicalism?* provides an excellent bird’s-eye view of the evangelical movement that has spanned centuries and continents. It is informative, up to date, and thought provoking, since it is more than just a narrative but a bold and critical self-examination. By revisiting the roots of the movement it anchors ‘evangelical’ firmly on the kingdom of God. It successfully corrects misconceptions of the term ‘evangelical’ and identifies some key problems of contemporary evangelicalism, especially in the realm of politics. It sounds a timely clarion call to ‘gospel people’ to rise above the world of politics and to follow the way of Christ. This is an important book for Christian clergy and laypeople alike and a book of interest to readers who want to know what evangelicalism is all about.”

—Maureen Yeung Marshall
Professor Emerita of Biblical Studies, Evangel Seminary, Hong Kong

“What is an evangelical? Are evangelicals fundamentalists? Are they Pentecostals? Do they care about God’s kingdom on earth or just about individual salvation? Are they social and political conservatives? Can they be found in mainline denominations? This book answers these questions via a remarkable collection of voices: a scientist, a Catholic, Nazarenes, and Baptists. Each essay provides scholarly knowledge that is accessible to general readers. The essays advanced my understanding of evangelicalism and reminded me that evangelicals are engaged with contemporary society, both Christianly and ethically. This book is especially recommended for people who do not call themselves evangelical but who are curious about one of the most significant Christian movements of the last three centuries, a movement whose influence today is global. If you have stereotypes about evangelicalism, be ready to think differently.”

—George Wiley
Emeritus Professor of Religion, Baker University, Baldwin City, Kansas

“In a time when words like ‘Christianity’ and ‘evangelical’ have become degraded by false practitioners, this collection of essays—rather than conceding key terms—offers fresh interpretations of the language used to define authentic followers of Jesus Christ. Deeply learned, yet quite accessible, this volume offers a global post-Christendom vision of how believers can bear witness with humility and hope in the transforming power of the gospel. This will be especially useful for doctor of ministry students, scholars, and practitioners in the body of Christ.”

—Molly T. Marshall
President and Professor of Theology and Spiritual Formation
Central Baptist Theological Seminary

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO

EVANGELICALISM?



WHATEVER HAPPENED TO
—
EVANGELICALISM?
—

AL TRUESDALE

EDITOR



THE FOUNDRY
PUBLISHING

Copyright © 2017 by Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City

Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City
PO Box 419527
Kansas City, MO 64141

ISBN 978-0-8341-3657-1

Printed in the
United States of America

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Cover Design: Rob Monacelli
Interior Design: Sharon Page

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Truesdale, Albert, 1941- editor.

Title: Whatever happened to evangelicalism? / Al Truesdale, editor.

Description: Kansas City, MO : Beacon Hill Press, [2017] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017041839 | ISBN 9780834136571 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Evangelicalism.

Classification: LCC BR1640.A25 W43 2017 | DDC 270.8/2—dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017041839>

The Internet addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers in this book are accurate at the time of publication. They are provided as a resource. Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City does not endorse them or vouch for their content or permanence.

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*So then, like prudent pilots, let us set the sails of our faith
for the course wherein we may pass by most safely,
and again follow the coasts of the Scriptures.*

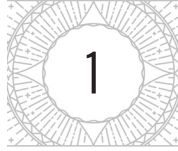
—Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, *Exposition of the Christian Faith*,
bk. 1, chap. 6, sec. 47

*The history of Christianity is the history of the truth of Christ
contending constantly against the truth as men see it.*

—Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, chap. 2, sec. 3

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DEFINING “EVANGELICAL” AN OVERVIEW

AL TRUESDALE

TRYING to “locate” Christians known as evangelicals socially or politically—as journalists often do—is futile. Evangelicals transcend economic, educational, ethnic, class, political, and denominational boundaries. Nevertheless, many believe there is an identifiable “common core.”¹ What unites evangelicals is more important than their differences.

When describing themselves, many evangelicals rarely use the word “evangelical.” They focus on the core convictions of the triune God, the Bible, faith, Jesus, salvation, evangelism, and discipleship.

To explore the contours of “evangelical,” we must approach the word from different perspectives, and we will do so in subsequent chapters. This chapter, however, (1) examines some challenges associated with defining evangelicals, (2) introduces some prominent definitions, and (3) lays a foundation for understanding why “gospel” and “kingdom” are inseparable.

CHALLENGES

First, providing a definition for the word “evangelical” is one thing, but trying to define or identify it as a movement in Christianity is quite another. The word derives from the Greek word *euangelion* (yoo-ang-ghel-ee-an). It simply means “good news” or “good message.” Our English word “gospel,” which translates *euangelion*, comes from two Old English words: *gōd* (good) and *spel* (news). In the New Testament we first encounter the word in Matthew. “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom” (4:23, NRSV). Matthew uses *euangelion* (or its cognate) five times, three of which explicitly reference the kingdom of God (4:23; 9:35; 24:14). Mark begins with the “good news of Jesus Christ” (1:1, NRSV). After John the Baptist was put in prison, Jesus went into “Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God” (1:14, NRSV). He said, “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15, NIV; cf. Matt. 4:23; Luke 4:18). *Euangelion* is used ninety-eight times in the New Testament (never in the fourth gospel) to articulate the many dimensions of the good news of the kingdom of God.

Second, defining “evangelical” as a distinct movement within the Christian faith can be a bewildering exercise. Evangelicals transcend narrow political identification and social and economic philosophies. They range from those on the political right to a new generation of evangelicals who loosely identify as “progressive evangelicals.”² As Wes Granberg-Michaelson correctly observes, “One size doesn’t fit all.”³ There is no recognized founder or founding document.⁴ Evangelicals affirm the historic ecumenical creeds (Apostles’, Athanasian, Nicene, and the Definition of Chalcedon). However, there is no single evangelical creed, and no uniform agreement on how the Christian faith should be practiced. Sharp disagreements over the sacraments go all the way back to the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. Consequently, evangelicals disagree about the meaning of the Lord’s Supper and baptism, including when and how one should be baptized.

We will search in vain for a unifying doctrine of the church, an agreed-upon form of worship (liturgy), accord in how the church should be governed (polity), or agreement about the role of women in Christian ministry. And although evangelicals “evangelize,” they disagree sharply about who should be “evangelized.” Is salvation meant for everyone or only for those whom God has “predestined” for salvation? Even the nature of Christ’s atonement for sin on the cross is a source of constant debate. Moreover, there is disagreement over the measure of personal transformation a Christian can expect in this life. Should Christians think of themselves primarily as converted sinners saved by grace, endlessly battling against a countervailing “flesh”? Or should they, through the Holy Spirit’s power, expect victorious Christian living in which the “flesh” is overcome?

The principle of *adiaphora* (Greek, “indifferent things” or “matters of indifference”)⁵ has often been employed to distinguish between what is commanded as essential for maintaining the integrity of the faith and what is permissible (“In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; in all things, charity”⁶). But the principle faces strong headwinds because evangelicals often have a difficult time distinguishing between the two. It’s an age-old problem. The apostle Paul dealt with it in Romans 14:1-23.

And now, as the final chapter of this book demonstrates, a thriving, Spirit-led part of the Roman Catholic Church in America, and elsewhere, identifies itself as evangelical.⁷

All of this might remind us of what American songwriter Bob Dylan sang in the 1960s, “The times they are a-changin’.”⁸

Third, some scholars debate whether “evangelical” should be treated as a noun or as an adjective. Does the term refer to an identifiable entity with an “essence”? Or does it refer to descriptive “traits” that more or less accurately describe diverse groups of Christians at certain times and places? Or is it a mixture of both?⁹

Fourth, a discussion of evangelicalism must occur within the context of a genuinely global story. “When using the term ‘evangelical,’”

Mark Noll, professor of history (now retired) at the University of Notre Dame and a leading historian and interpreter of evangelicalism cautions, "It is now imperative to consider the entire world. . . . More evangelicals now live in Nigeria and Brazil, when taken together, than in the U.S." For example, in the Majority World, "African developments are more important than anything occurring in the old evangelical homelands."¹⁰ If "evangelical" has a core meaning that offers ongoing viability, it must be one that provides space for the plethora of cultural distinctions that currently enrich Christianity's global story.

Fifth, when attempting to delineate any part of the Christian family we risk compromising three of the four marks of the church—*one*, *catholic*, and *apostolic* (Nicene Creed; see appendix A). Whatever an adequate definition of "evangelical" might be, and whatever its contributing emphases, let's remember that evangelicals are simply part of orthodox Christianity.

SOME PROMINENT DEFINITIONS

As we examine the following representative definitions we should heed a warning by Mark Noll. Evangelicalism is not a fixed "ism." It has "always been made up of shifting movements, temporary alliances, and the lengthening shadows of individuals." At best, our efforts "provide some order for a multifaceted, complex set of impulses and organizations."¹¹ Referring to its institutional variety, British religious historian David Bebbington says evangelicalism is a "wine that has been poured into many bottles."¹² Today the "bottles" include many more cultural contexts than existed when the phenomenon appeared in the eighteenth century.¹³

Bebbington's Definition

Among the several definitions of "evangelical," one of the most respected was developed by David Bebbington. He examined the variations of British evangelical religion that had occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and found that the character of

evangelicalism had emerged and changed in response to British high culture. His highly influential work appeared in 1989 as *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*.¹⁴ Bebbington discovered that those who could be identified as evangelicals “gave exclusive pride of place to a small number of leading principles.”¹⁵ But in spite of the continuity of “certain hallmarks” over time,¹⁶ the history of evangelicalism shows that some evangelical principles considered to be most prominent in one period of its history gave place to others in other periods.¹⁷ Evangelicalism is identifiable but not fixed in a hierarchy of priorities.

Bebbington identified “four qualities that have been the special marks of evangelical religion.” Together they form “a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of evangelicalism.”¹⁸ The four “hallmarks” are (1) “*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed;” (2) “*activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort;” (3) “*biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible;” and (4) “what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.”¹⁹ The four are, according to Bebbington’s analysis, the “defining attributes of evangelical religion.”²⁰ Those who have “displayed all the common features that have persisted over time”²¹ are the evangelicals.

Scholars commonly refer to these “four qualities” as the Bebbington quadrilateral. The quadrilateral provides a basis for understanding evangelicalism in England and the United States from the eighteenth through the twentieth century. Even as observers modify the quadrilateral, it remains what Kelly Cross Elliott of Abilene Christian University calls a “venerable standard.”²²

Mark Noll characterizes Bebbington’s definition as a “noun” because it attempts to define the “essence” of evangelism.²³

A “New” Definition

In the April 2016 issue of *Christianity Today*, National Association of Evangelicals president Leith Anderson and LifeWay Research executive director Ed Stetzer reported the results of a new research-driven

attempt to define “evangelical.”²⁴ The “new” definition was influenced by Bebbington’s quadrilateral. With the help of a group of evangelical scholars, Bebbington’s four characteristics were turned into a list of seventeen questions that bridge *belief*, *belonging*, and *behavior*. Among those in the research sampling, four belief statements emerged as constituting a common set of “evangelical” beliefs: (1) “the Bible is the highest authority for what I believe”;²⁵ (2) “it is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior”; (3) Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin”; and (4) “only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation.”²⁶ Those who agreed with the four were “likely to *self-identify* as evangelicals.”²⁷

Anderson and Stetzer recognize the statements place some Christians under the “evangelical” umbrella who might never call themselves “evangelical.” Conversely, there might be some self-described evangelicals who do not strongly agree with all four belief statements.²⁸

Larsen’s Contribution

In *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, Timothy Larsen defines an evangelical as (1) “an orthodox Protestant” (2) “who stands in the tradition of the global Christian networks arising from the eighteenth-century revival movements associated with John Wesley and George Whitefield;” (3) who has a preeminent place for the Bible in her or his Christian life as the divinely inspired, final authority in matters of faith and practice;” (4) “who stresses reconciliation with God through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross;” and (5) “who stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual to bring about conversion and an ongoing life of fellowship with God and service to God and others, including the duty of all believers to participate in the task of proclaiming the gospel to all people.”²⁹

Noll identifies Larsen’s definition as one that bridges “adjective” and “noun.”

Seven Defining Affirmations

An important definition of “evangelical” appears in the Statement of Faith of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). The NAE connects nearly forty denominations, thousands of churches, schools, nonprofits, businesses, and individuals.³⁰ Its Statement of Faith includes seven affirmations: (1) “We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.” (2) “We believe that there is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” (3) “We believe in the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return in power and glory.” (4) “We believe that for the salvation of lost and sinful people, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential.” (5) “We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life.” (6) “We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life and they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.” (7) “We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.”³¹

Noll's Evangelical Traits

One of the most inclusive accounts of evangelical “traits” or “convictions” appears throughout Mark Noll’s influential manifesto *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. For him “evangelical” is an adjective, not a *noun*. This means the traits might not always characterize evangelicals. The traits Noll identifies appear along the way as he lauds the contributions of some and laments the failures of others.³²

According to Noll, contemporary evangelical thought “is best understood as a set of intellectual assumptions arising from the nineteenth-century synthesis of American and Protestant values, and then filtered through the trauma of fundamentalist-modernist strife.”³³ The traits Noll identifies include (1) “adherence to the Bible as the revealed

Word of God"; (2) certainty that Scripture consistently reveals God as the "author of nature" and the "sustainer of human institutions";³⁴ (3) the "need for a supernatural new birth"; (4) "spreading the gospel through missions and personal evangelism"; (5) the "saving character of Jesus' death and resurrection";³⁵ (6) the "indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit" in Christians; (7) the importance of "personal sanctity" and the "possibility of growing in grace throughout human life";³⁶ (8) evangelicals are "not prone to write off marginalized races or the poor";³⁷ (9) the "universal need for salvation in Christ"; (10) the "supernatural character of the incarnation";³⁸ (11) the "supernatural character" of the Christian faith; (12) the "objectivity of Christian morality"; (13) the "timeless validity of Scripture";³⁹ and (14) regeneration and sanctification by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰

These traits are laudatory and essential for the Christian faith. However, they are inherently reliant upon something more primary and determinative—the kingdom of God.⁴¹ No combination of Christian convictions, no matter how constitutive, imperative, and glorious, is complete until solidly placed within the orbit of and explained with reference to the kingdom of God.⁴²

THE "GOSPEL" OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

In the New Testament, "gospel" is not a stand-alone word. Evangelicals too often err by attempting to define and preach the gospel without first anchoring it in the big picture of the kingdom of God inaugurated in Jesus Christ (see Matt. 10:7; 12:17-29; Luke 8:1; 9:2). Not surprisingly, unnecessary and obstructive doctrinal disputes often follow. When not defined by and consistently indexed to the kingdom of God, "gospel" can birth other kingdoms—nationalistic, denominational, economic, or even racial—that oppose or misrepresent the kingdom of God. Separated from the kingdom, "gospel" loses its prophetic, judging power (see the third dimension of the kingdom below).⁴³

Jesus and the Kingdom

The Gospels do not say Jesus came preaching the “gospel,” but that he came preaching the “gospel of the kingdom of God” (see Matt. 4:23; Mark 1:14; Luke 4:43; John 3:3). The “good news” proclaimed in his teaching, healings, parables, and violations of the Jewish boundary laws was that the kingdom of God was “at hand.” It was appearing in him. All the hopes of Israel and God’s promises for the nations—his covenantal faithfulness—were achieving their fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah (Matt. 12:17-29; 2 Cor. 1:19-22). In the Messiah, God was ending exile, dealing with sin, undoing the powers of darkness, and ushering in the age to come.

Hence, it is a mistake to treat “gospel” as an independent term that defines and encompasses salvation. This essential part of our Christian grammar must be restored to its rooting in the kingdom of God. Otherwise, “gospel” will never be, for us, as comprehensive, generative, and demanding as it is in the New Testament. “Gospel” in our understanding, teaching, and lives must approximate its magnitude as revealed in the person, ministry, and atonement of Jesus Christ.⁴⁴

Jesus said, “[The] gospel of the kingdom will be [preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14, NIV). But the Gospels expose a sharp division between what Jesus believed and taught and what many—including his disciples—expected the kingdom to be.

New Testament scholar N. T. Wright contrasts expectations of the average first-century Galilean with the actual proclamation of Jesus Christ. While awaiting the kingdom, the average Galilean wasn’t seeking to secure a place in heaven after death. Rather, Jews in Jesus’s day were living under centuries-old foreign rule. They asked, “If Israel is truly God’s chosen people, why, after all this time, are we still living under pagan rule?” When expecting the kingdom of God, the people waited for God’s reign to be established forcefully and decisively over the distorted world they faced daily—accented by the maddening Roman tax structure. The people believed that God would establish his

rule and vindicate Israel's hopes. He would terminate oppression by bringing peace and justice to all his creation. However, although the expectation was fairly general, there was no uniform agreement on how God would accomplish this.

On the other hand, many Jewish leaders, including the powerful chief priests, had learned to "game the system" for personal benefit. They dutifully did the bidding of the occupiers. Herod Antipas (20 BC–AD 39, son of Herod the Great), slayer of John the Baptist (Matt. 14:1-12), wealthy and arrogant Roman puppet, unashamedly conspired with his Roman overlords.

Wright explains that Jesus taught and acted upon two vital points. *First*, Jesus believed the creator God had purposed from the beginning to address and deal with his creation's problems *through* Israel. Israel was not just an example of a nation under God. It would be his instrument for redeeming the world. *Second*, Jesus believed Israel's vocation would be fulfilled by history reaching a great climactic moment. Israel would be saved from its enemies, and the creator God—the covenant-making God—would finally establish his love and justice forever. Mercy and truth would embrace not only Israel but also the whole world.

In Christ, God was doing what Israel had hoped for, but in astonishing, often offensive, disappointing, and unrecognizable ways. Jesus's deeds electrified popular expectations and horrified Israel's religious and political power brokers. However, instead of satisfying popular expectations, "out of [Jesus's] deep awareness, in loving faith and prayer [to] the one he called 'Abba, Father,' he went back to Israel's Scriptures and found there another kingdom-model, equally Jewish if not more so."⁴⁵ Now, Jesus proclaimed, the long-expected kingdom was "at hand" (Mark 1:15, KJV). In his person and presence, God was unveiling his age-old plan, "bringing his sovereignty to bear on Israel and the world as he had always intended, bringing justice and mercy to Israel and the world."⁴⁶ Nothing less than a "new state of affairs," the "long-awaited rule of Israel's God on earth as in heaven," was being "launched into the world."⁴⁷

In his deeds and parables Jesus enacted the kingdom; he “cracked open” the expectations of his hearers and called them to come to grips with how God’s reign was now breaking upon them. He, the Lord of the Sabbath, confronted and rejected Israel’s kingdom dreams and visions. By doing so, he unleashed a storm that steadily built toward the cross.

There were *three main dimensions* in Jesus’s understanding and teaching about the kingdom of God (Matthew uses the term “heaven,” 3:2): (1) the end of exile,⁴⁸ (2) the call of a “renewed people,” and (3) a warning of “disaster and vindication” to come.⁴⁹

First, Jeremiah and other prophets linked establishing God’s kingdom to the end of exile. After that, God would accomplish the great work of new creation. Whatever the promised Messiah might be expected to do, he would certainly bring an end to exile. With their land under the domination of pagan rulers, clearly exile (begun in 587/6 BC when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed) had not ended.

Jesus’s parables were rooted in the Jewish Scriptures. When unpacked, they reveal how the prophetic language of returning from exile was setting the stage for the work of new creation that was being fulfilled in the words and deeds of Jesus. The parable of the sower in Mark 4:1-20, for instance, is a Jewish story about how the kingdom of God was arriving. Prophets such as Jeremiah had spoken of God again *sowing* his people in their own land (Jer. 4:3; 31:27; Ezek. 36:8-9). Isaiah used the image of sowing and reaping to speak of God’s great work of new creation to be accomplished after the exile (Isa. 40:6-8; 44:4; 55:10). To explain the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:13-15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10), Jesus quoted Isaiah 6:9-10. Then verse 13 describes new shoots springing from a burnt tree stump. In judgment the tree had been cut down. But from its stump new shoots would spring. Jesus’s parable of the sower is about what God was now doing in Jesus’s ministry. He was fulfilling what the prophets promised—judging Israel for her idolatry while bringing into existence a new people, a renewed Israel, the returned-from-exile people of God.⁵⁰

The story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) is another parable about exile and the kingdom of God. The account of a scoundrel son wasting his inheritance in a pagan country and then being welcomed home is a "sharp-edged, context-specific message about what was happening in Jesus' ministry. More specifically, it was about what was happening through Jesus' welcome of outcasts, his eating with sinners."⁵¹ The long-awaited return from exile was actually happening, and it didn't look the way people, such as the Pharisees and lawyers, had expected. Like the elder brother, they thought Jesus's version of "return from exile" was scandalous. So they rejected the return. But there it was, "happening under the noses" of the blind, "self-appointed guardians" of Israel's expectations.⁵²

The long-awaited end of exile had arrived! This was the "good news," the *euangelion*. In Jesus, Israel's God was becoming King. "Would Israel recognize what God was doing in their midst in the person of his Son?"⁵³

Second, in Jesus's announcement of the end of exile and in his embodiment of the arriving kingdom, he was calling into existence a renewed people. His hearers had been waiting for the arrival of God's kingdom. Now, at this, the climactic turning point of history, they were being "invited to audition" for roles in it, "to become kingdom-people," the "true, renewed people of God."⁵⁴ Jesus called his hearers to "repent [Greek, *metanoia* (reconsider, turn around)] and believe."⁵⁵ He was telling them to give up their own agendas and trust his utterly risky way of being Israel.⁵⁶

Repent. Embrace with your entire being Jesus's way of being Israel, his way of bringing in the kingdom—turning the other cheek, going the extra mile with a Roman soldier, losing your life to gain it (Matt. 5). Abandon your prized dreams of nationalist revolution, Jesus said. Instead, become the light of the world, the salt of the earth, the city set on a hill that cannot be hidden, where the one true God will reveal himself for all humankind (vv. 13-16). Only then will you be "converted."

Romano Guardini carefully considered Jesus's call for repentance and concluded that when one "repents" a "profound revolution be-

gins.”⁵⁷ One born anew by the Spirit into God’s kingdom recognizes Jesus Christ and his kingdom as the “supreme measure of all possible reality.”⁵⁸ All “world-anchored self-glorification” is surrendered “into the hands of the God of Revelation. . . . All that until now has seemed certain suddenly becomes questionable. The whole conception of reality, the whole idea of existence is turned upside-down.”⁵⁹ Candidates for kingdom entry, Guardini insists, must resolutely confront and answer the question, “*Is Christ really so great that he can be the norm of all that is?*”⁶⁰

Taking up the cross and following Jesus entailed shouldering his utterly risky agenda and abandoning all others.⁶¹ His radical invitation was accompanied by a radical welcome. To the absolute scandal of many of Jesus’s contemporaries, in repeated celebrations, and with joy, he welcomed into the kingdom, as the new people of God, persons completely lacking in credentials for such an honor. His free meals and free-for-all welcome were a central feature of his vision of the kingdom—joyous and radical acceptance and forgiveness. And he was doing all this while claiming to be one with his heavenly Father (see John 10:30). Asserting what would have been blasphemy had it not been true, Jesus declared, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9, NIV). “The inbreaking kingdom Jesus was announcing created a new world, a new context, and he was challenging his hearers to become the new people that this new context demanded, the citizens of this new world.”⁶²

“This is the context” in “which we should” read the “Sermon on the Mount,” the new way of being Israel, the kingdom way, the people of God (Matt. 5–7).⁶³ “This was to be the way of true love and justice through which Israel’s God would be revealed to the watching world.”⁶⁴ Jesus so subverted the kingdom agenda, cherished by his opponents, that either his agenda or theirs would have to be displaced. The same is true for us today (Matt. 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23).

Third, Jesus and his contemporaries lived with a grand scriptural narrative told in terms of a new exodus when God would deliver Israel

from the pharaohs who exalted themselves against God's people. He would bring them through their trials; vindication would come at last. The traditional story that formerly featured Egypt, Babylon, and Syria now featured Rome. But Jesus stood against the way this story was told and against its anticipated military and political outcome. "God's purpose would not after all be to vindicate Israel as a nation against the pagan hordes. . . . On the contrary, Jesus announced . . . that God's judgment would fall not on the surrounding nations but on Israel that had failed to be the light of the world."⁶⁵ Who then would be vindicated? "Back comes the answer with increasing force and clarity: Jesus himself and his followers. They were now the true, reconstituted Israel. They would suffer and suffer horribly, but God would vindicate them."⁶⁶

Warnings about a great, coming judgment that occupy much of the first three Gospels (Matt. 24:1-51; Mark 13:1-37; Luke 21:5-36) were like those of the great prophets, warnings about impending judgment within history. Like Jeremiah who viewed Babylon as God's agent in punishing his rebellious people, Jesus prophesied the fall of Jerusalem. God would judge Israel for choosing the way of violence instead of the way of his Messiah. The eventual destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (AD 70) should not have come as a surprise. In Luke 13 Jesus warns that if Israel refuses to repent of her flight into national rebellion against Rome, Roman swords will become the instruments of God's judgment. The warnings reach their climax as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and weeps:

If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you. (Luke 19:41-44, NIV)

What memories might have flooded Jesus's mind as he looked at the city of David, lying there across the brook of Kidron? Did he recall

the words of Jeremiah, “Long ago you broke your yoke and burst your bonds” (Jer. 2:20, NRSV)? Did he remember the moment after his first public sermon in Nazareth when his listeners rose up and attempted to cast him over the brow of a hill (Luke 4:28-30)? Maybe he recalled when, after he had said “I and the Father are one,” the people picked up stones to kill him (John 10:30-31, NIV). The generation that rejected the kingdom of God as proclaimed by and embodied in Jesus would also be the generation upon whom God’s judgment would fall.⁶⁷

The Grace of the Kingdom

No New Testament writer more faithfully or insightfully proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom than did the apostle Paul.⁶⁸ In recent groundbreaking work, New Testament scholar John Barclay has helped us comprehend how faithful Paul was to his Lord and what will be required of us to receive, understand, live, and proclaim the gospel of the kingdom. Barclay maps six ways human and divine “gifts” were understood in the Greco-Roman world, including Second Temple Judaism. The six delineations include, “but [are] not limited by, theological discourse on ‘grace.’”⁶⁹ Normally, gifts were given generously but selectively “to suitable, worthy, or appropriate recipients.”⁷⁰ Only when we comprehend the vast distance between Greco-Roman understandings of gifts (grace) and how Paul understood and proclaimed the radical grace of God manifest in Jesus Christ can we begin to grasp the enormous reconstruction of human life that receiving the grace of Christ entails—its “transformative dynamic.”⁷¹

Paul is an apostle of the “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal. 6:18, NIV),⁷² God’s completely unconditioned, unmerited gift in Christ. Barclay classifies Paul’s understanding of grace as “incongruous,” which means it is given indiscriminately “without regard to the worth of the recipient.”⁷³ In Christ, through the gift of grace, God *revalued* human life. His grace annuls all other ways of establishing human worth, community, and vocation. It voids all human schemes of value. Human measures are “out”; God’s measure is “in.” There is nothing people have done or

could do, have been or could be, to deserve the gift. This is “good news” intended in abundant richness for one and all, including publicans and sinners. Receiving it entails embracing all its implications.

Paul’s understanding of grace is consistent with Jesus’s ministry as seen in the Gospels. Jesus’s kingdom agenda was radical, reorienting, and renewing. In his epistles, Paul joyously and faithfully extends the lines of grace to all dimensions of human life, just as we observed in Jesus’s teaching about the kingdom. The epistle to the Galatians is a prime example. Here, Paul is interested not only in informing the Galatians about grace but also in placing them “within its transformative dynamic,” beginning with the implications of Christ’s self-giving, self-donation in death (Gal. 2:20).⁷⁴ Proceeding from the radical grace of God manifest in Jesus Christ—who is God’s grace incarnate—Paul worked to form communities beholden not to the Torah (the Law) but solely to the “law of Christ” (6:2, NIV).⁷⁵ This new people, radically formed by the (incongruous) grace of Christ, is the “Israel of God” (v. 16, NIV).

Thus what Paul believed and taught about God’s grace had primarily to do with the creation of a new community,⁷⁶ the new people of God, created by and in conformity with the (incongruous) grace of God in Christ Jesus. Though individuals are included, community, not isolated individuals, is primary. Consistent with what Jesus proclaimed about the kingdom of God, Paul believed the outcome of grace is the formation of innovative, countercultural communities impossible for Jews or Gentiles alone. This new people of God, called into existence by God’s unmerited and indiscriminate grace, spans the boundary dividing Gentiles and Jews. In Galatians, Paul vehemently rejects anything—including the Jewish law—that would compromise this new community of grace, this new people of God called into existence by Jesus Christ (5:1-26).⁷⁷

The “good news” of the kingdom as Paul understood and preached it, Barclay says, will “realign and recalibrate” all loyalties.⁷⁸ The “incongruous gift enacted in Christ” will place its recipients “at odds with the normative conventions that govern human systems of value.”⁷⁹ This

being “at odds” with governing norms “signals a relation of misfit, even contradiction, between the ‘good news’ and the typical structures of human thought and behavior. The good news stands askance to human norms because its origin lies outside the human sphere.”⁸⁰

Paul, who was taught by the risen Christ (Gal. 1:11-12), was faithful to his Lord’s rejection of all value systems that made works, merit, or any other forms of cultural or religious capital the basis for forming God’s people. Grace must be received just as it was received by the publican at prayer (Luke 18:9-14), Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9), and Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2-10), *or it won’t be received at all*. For those whose lives are reconstituted in Christ, the supreme definition of worth for everyone is the good news of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God dispenses with all values that would subvert it.⁸¹

Because the concrete life of this new people of God cannot be conceived apart from a norm for conduct, Paul teaches that certain kinds of communal conduct, Christian behavior, proceed from God’s gift in Christ (see Rom. 12:1–13:14). The new people of God are to be marked by particular disciplines and behavioral norms that socially and publicly express their obedient response to the gift (Rom. 12:1–13:14). They are called to live out a “gospel-driven holiness” because they now “live in the Spirit-driven ‘age to come.’”⁸²

The next chapter will extend these lines into other parts of the New Testament. Here we have seen enough to know that fidelity to the Scriptures rules out identifying as “Christian” any understanding of “gospel” not formed and governed by the kingdom of God as it came in the grace of Jesus Christ. In all four Gospels, N. T. Wright explains, the proclamation of the kingdom and that of the crucifixion are inseparable. “The kingdom comes through Jesus’ entire work, which finds its intended fulfillment in his shameful death.”⁸³ Too often we try to separate themes that “belong inextricably together.”⁸⁴ There is always a danger that some part of the faith will break away and become the basis for a new and less comprehensive, less demanding quasi-religion.

Confessing that the reign of God in righteousness, justice, and new creation has begun upon this earth is “good news.” However, when reading the morning news about the rape of helpless women by soldiers in South Sudan, for instance, the confession becomes daunting. Nevertheless, no less of a confession is required of an Easter faith (1 Cor. 15:20-28; Rev. 11:15).

Like all expressions of the Christian faith, evangelicalism stands ever in need of correction and instruction and of being called forward by the crucified, risen, and reigning Lord of the kingdom, who victoriously strides among the “lampstands” as the “Alpha and the Omega” (Rev. 1:7-16, NIV).

For Further Study

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