

Let's talk strategy again today, the most important strategy we will ever deal with—Kingdom strategy and the central role of the gospel. But what does the Gospel truly mean? Believe it or not, the clear understanding of what “the gospel” means has been misdefined and even ravaged since the days of the early church. How about these stunning words written to the Galatian believers by the Apostle Paul?...

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.” (Galatians 1:5-9 ESV)

Now these words of Paul are very clear and very strong: *let those who are preaching a gospel contrary to the one you received be accursed!* And, truth be told, the correct definition of the gospel and how it's handled is central to the awesome mission and growth of the Kingdom of God. And, a further truth be told here: many people since the Cross have portrayed themselves as representing the gospel when they are not: often they are representing something quite different...a counterfeit...a gospel contrary to the one Paul corrals in his epistles. ...But let's go back a bit. *Just who started voicing the authentic Gospel?*

Mark's Gospel introduced Jesus's unique mission and ministry early in his story with these striking words: “Now after John [the Baptist] was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’” (1:14)

Think about those words! This message is for every person—both during Jesus's time *and now!* No matter how holy you strive to be, no matter how much you strive to follow the Mosaic Law, no matter what theology you ascribe to, no matter that you were sprinkled with water—the truth is, according to Jesus Himself, you must repent, you must change your mind and believe in the gospel of His Kingdom!

You see, every well-meaning solution to humanity's troubling condition has failed apart from the Cross. Listen: there was and is no redemption in established culture...or new culture. There was and is no redemption in established politics...or new politics. There was and is no redemption through mere participation in synagogues or churches. There was and is no redemption through parents or ancestors. And there is no redemption offered through any worldly kingdom. The Bible tells us that only the Kingdom of God is unshakeable. (Hebrews 12:28) So now remember this: as to the persons or leaders or pastors preaching anything different than that, Paul wrote “let them be accursed.”

OK, what else did Paul write about the gospel? Well, Romans 1:16 says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Yes, that's definitional: gospel is all about salvation for everyone who believes. That's why the gospel is the gospel—the word “gospel” is translated from the Greek word *euangelion*, which, when broken down into its two parts, means “*good news!*” And you know what? The entire Bible works to set the stage for and then deliver this good news for all! So how about some fun, personally relevant specifics?

A very key revelation of the coming gospel of the Kingdom of God was in Isaiah's word from the Lord in chapter 52. “....my people shall know my name. Therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here I am. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’” Think of it: Isaiah wrote of those “who bring”—*and that's us!* And we are to *bring the good news*, we are to *publish the news of God's peace and salvation*. We are to be proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom, doing exactly what Jesus did as recorded by Mark in his Gospel. You want to be like Christ? Bring the Good News! There's absolutely nothing holding us back! ...Or is something else often deemed more important?

So, want to hear some sobering history? After the U.S. Civil War, some church leaders started diligently working towards solving such perceived societal issues like economic inequality, poverty, alcoholism, lack

of labor unionization, and the dangers of war. Prominent influencers like Congregationalist clergyman Washington Gladden and Baptist pastor Walter Raushenbusch worked throughout the late 1800s and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century on what came to become embracingly and unashamedly called the “Social Gospel.” Wonder if these two famous clergymen ever read Paul’s warning to the Galatians?

In fact, in 1907, Pastor Raushenbusch published the book *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, then ten years later authored the book *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, which included, of course, his version of supposedly “Christian” social cures. Yes, his Social Gospel would supposedly “restore” Jesus’s teaching that would help God save the *current problem social order of the kingdoms of this world*. Of course, this was a quite modern, American version of Paul’s warning of “another gospel.” The Good News of the Gospel was to be overshadowed, to be interpreted as merely helping “society get better.”

Many churches and denominations embraced the Social Gospel vision! Generations of these institutions have continued this social crusade and are now broadly known as “liberal” or “progressive” churches focused on such issues as open immigration, inequality, DEI, and socialism. But there are also those known as “conservative” churches focused on abortion, sexual politics, and immigration control. Now all of these topics certainly may be worthy and important. But these issues and the results are simply not the Biblical gospel—not even close! Turns out, both sides have followed Raushenbusch’s example and created their own theologies for social issues. And often these drumbeat issues—whether liberal or conservative—can and do compete with the overarching Kingdom priority—you know, *the gospel itself!*

Let’s get some key clarity. Two of the important truths of Paul’s writings are: *every born-again believer has been transferred to the Kingdom of God’s Son* (Colossians 1:13-14)—and *every believer is an ambassador for Christ* (2 Corinthians 5:20). Note the word used: we are ambassadors for Christ. That is, the Messiah. That’s not a restraint to Jesus the Teacher or God the Judge that much social-issue rhetoric seems to revolve around. Honestly, do U.S. churchgoers rejoice most when their neighbors embrace a Trump...an Obama...or the Risen Christ?

There’s something running pretty deep here. That same Greek word meaning “good news” is the root for the English words *evangelism* and *evangelist* and ultimately the currently-popular-label *evangelical*. What an amazing thing to be rooted in: *the Good News!* But I must confess something here: for years, I have not identified myself publicly or privately as an Evangelical. That’s because, to both Evangelicals *and* to those who tend to dislike Evangelicals intensely, the word “Evangelical” immediately tags the person as merely being pro-life, anti-gay-marriage, and, sadly, often condemning and unloving. *Not the gospel.*

So, my identification to combat that is to say I’m a *Great Commission Christian*—you know, the folks that believe the clear primacy instructed by Jesus Himself of going forth with the utterly-unique gospel of the Kingdom to make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20). Frankly, the term *Great Commission Christian* can tend to startle both secularists *and* Christians, no matter whether social liberals *or* social conservatives. It’s as if responding with a born-again “yes” to hearing the gospel of the Kingdom is culturally confined to American hillbillies or someone in Africa. And you know what? Sadly, that might be more true than ever!

But, wait, some might say, social concerns in action can lead to an opening for the true gospel. Right on, that’s awesome, go for it, give food *and* the ultimate love of the gospel to your neighbors. But merely giving food or changing laws is not the true gospel—in fact, as a result, many understandably think that’s the best that Christians can or should offer, yeah, that naked kindnesses, politics, and culture wars are it!

You still want Jesus the Teacher? John 18:36: “My kingdom is not of this world.” Hey, the true gospel points the way to the Kingdom of God’s Son. And Mark 8:35-36: “...whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?” *So, just what is the gospel? For you personally?* Are you working to gain the whole world of culture or politics or wealth? Or are you losing your life for Christ’s sake and the gospel’s? Yeah, what’s your life’s essential strategy?

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. Do you believe that many American Christians' prominent, long-standing focus on both liberal and conservative cultural issues and politics has diminished the message of the gospel of the Kingdom? Discuss.
2. How do you identify your Christian "tribe?" ...By denomination or affiliation like *Baptist* or *Presbyterian*? ...By the word *Evangelical*? ...By *Great Commission Christian*? ...Or what? Why? Discuss.
3. What do you believe best describes your true position as to proclaiming the Gospel and fulfilling the Great Commission in your life? Is that a New-Covenant command from Jesus to obey? Or merely a suggestion for you to consider? Or is proclaiming the gospel just the job of pastors and appointed missionaries? Discuss.