

THE

DISCIPLESHIP

GOSPEL

WHAT JESUS PREACHED—
WE MUST FOLLOW

Bill Hull & Ben Sobels

The Discipleship Gospel

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PART ONE

THE GOSPEL JESUS PREACHED

In this part of the book, we get into the weeds of the problem as we see it. However, we're spending only enough time on the problem to get to a clear solution. Focusing on the problem can get us tangled into a theological pretzel if we don't continue toward a solution.

The true gospel is Jesus' gospel, which he referred to as the "gospel of the kingdom" (Matt. 24:14), and this gospel was crystal clear to the early church (Acts 2:14-41). Since then though, the church has drifted away from preaching Jesus' gospel—at various times and in different ways—and has believed in different "gospels," which aren't really gospels at all. They all have one common characteristic: they remove the necessity of discipleship from Jesus' gospel. The type of preaching that comes from believing these gospels ultimately suffocates disciple making in the church. Yet making disciples is one of the greatest tasks that Christ has called the church to do until he returns. In our day, the church has once again loosed its mooring from the dock of Jesus' gospel and has been carried away by the currents of our culture—with the wind and the waves—to believe in false gospels.

After describing the problem, we'll lay the foundation for recovering Jesus' gospel for the church. Specifically, we're unpacking the gospel that Jesus preached. While gospel preaching in our day seems so ill-defined and changeable, it was static and well-defined in Jesus' day—so clearly defined that people knew when they had received it, what they had been entrusted with, and when they had passed it on to others (2 Tim. 2:2). The gospel had definition for the early believers, and that is what we seek with this book—to provide a clear definition of the gospel for believers today.

In Part 1, we open up the four Gospel records together—primarily Mark's Gospel—and begin to see just how clearly Jesus defined the gospel. Specifically, we want to show you that the gospel Jesus preached had seven essential elements, which provide the framework on which believers today can rebuild their understanding of Jesus' gospel, the only true gospel—what we call *the discipleship gospel*. As we rediscover this together, the key component of Christ's gospel that we're missing today is this: Christ doesn't call us to make a *decision* about the gospel, but to *be disciples* because of his gospel. With these things in mind, let's jump into this fascinating and critical gospel discussion by first unpacking the nature of the problem so that we can understand the solution with greater precision.

1

THE DISCIPLESHIP GOSPEL (A.K.A. THE KINGDOM GOSPEL)

“Let the pure gospel go forth in all its lion-like majesty, and it will soon clear its own way and ease itself of its adversaries.”

—CHARLES SPURGEON

New Testament scholars agree that Jesus spoke about the kingdom of God more than anything else during his earthly ministry—more than one hundred times in fact.¹ He used many parables and metaphors to explain the mysteries of the kingdom. But unfortunately, saying that people today are a bit fuzzy on the meaning of “the gospel of the kingdom” is an understatement. Confusion abounds, so let’s simplify the meaning here by addressing the essence of what Jesus was asking people to do when he announced the Good News of the kingdom—namely, to follow him as a disciple.

The way to get a handle on the kingdom and its vast claim over humanity was by repenting of sins, believing in Jesus as the messiah, and following

him as a rabbi.² People today also need to repent of their sins, believe the Good News about Jesus as savior, and follow him as teacher and Lord. To join his kingdom, we must become disciples or “apprentices” of Jesus, people who actually do what he did. That is why we are calling the gospel of the kingdom “the discipleship gospel.” What we mean is that “*discipleship*”—or *following Jesus*—is an essential part of the Good News he preached.

The Good News of the kingdom is that eternal life begins now—the moment you repent, believe the Good News of Christ, receive the Holy Spirit, and start following him.³ Repentance, belief, and Spirit-filled obedience go together. God never intended for them to be separated (as if that were possible). The kingdom is holistic: you enter a new realm where “all things are become new” (2 Cor. 5:17, KJV). When you start following Jesus, you begin to prove you believe what he says. This is quite different from what is commonly taught as the gospel: that if you believe the right religious facts, you’re saved, and following Jesus is just an option. What we must teach, however, is that Jesus started with the call to follow him. His disciples started believing in him and grew spiritually in stages. We defy any experienced follower of Jesus who says that growing through a gradual process is not an accurate description of their life in Christ. Life in Christ doesn’t begin with instant maturity and immediate understanding; it starts with essential elements and grows from there.

The Place of Obedience

Our deepest desires are revealed by our daily life and habits. The Anglican preacher and evangelist John Wesley had it right when he encouraged the right behaviors among new believers—behaviors that led them to deepen their belief over time. John’s Gospel shows us that although the original five disciples began to follow Jesus by faith alone, the other disciples grew in their faith when they witnessed his first miracle of turning water into wine: “This miraculous sign at Cana in Galilee was the first time Jesus revealed his glory. And his disciples believed in him” (John 1:35-51). As the disciples followed the one who had called them, their belief deepened. Simply put, we are believers first, and we deepen our beliefs through the practices, traditions, and habits of our lives.

Don’t misunderstand us though. On a certain level, believing produces behavior, too. It must be that way; otherwise, each of us would draw the line of conversion in different places. Only God knows what true belief is—that’s

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why we're not the judges. One thing is clear: following Jesus is an actual, existential behavior that demonstrates the reality of our faith in him (James 2:14-20).⁴

At the heart of the gospel of the kingdom is the simple question, "Are you doing the will of God?" This comes from Jesus' message centering on the vital role of obedience to enter God's kingdom: "Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter" (Matt. 7:21-23). This passage reveals to us that living in the kingdom is the same as being a disciple of Christ, someone who does the will of God. When you decide to follow Christ, you enter a new realm, a new kingdom, where his will is done. Recall the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).⁵ This passage also shows us that following Jesus is vital to entering the kingdom of God. So even in The Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught his disciples that heaven is where God's will is done and that wherever his will is done on earth, the kingdom exists.

The same is true for us today. We must obey God; otherwise, we don't really understand the gospel Jesus preached. That's why the word "discipleship" is crucial—because we're following a living Christ. We appreciate the sobering words of the twentieth-century German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was martyred for his faith: "Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ."⁶ A faith that isn't lived out through action is not faith; it's a life without Christ. Plain and simple, if you want the living Christ, then you must follow him. That is discipleship, and that's why we call it "the discipleship gospel."

What Happened to Following Jesus?

Most of Jesus' apostles were in their late teens and early twenties. They were products of orthodox Jewish homes and local synagogues where they had learned the Scriptures. They were conversant with the great messianic passages from the prophets. From this starting point, Jesus taught them about the kingdom and showed them what it looked like in this world.⁷ Because of



this, they understood him as king, the promised messiah. They didn't need to work through centuries of Christian tradition to figure out what he wanted.

In fact, the Gospel of Mark includes the call to follow Jesus in Jesus' earliest preaching in Galilee: "The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!" (Mark 1:14-15). Then, they took the most logical action possible. They followed him and became his disciples:

One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. Jesus called out to them, "Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!" And they left their nets at once and followed him.

—MARK 1:16-18

The disciples' response to Jesus' call was directly connected to Jesus' preaching about the kingdom. They heard his message, followed him, and became his disciples.

Connecting Faith to Action

It's impossible to separate belief from action. They are one and the same. When the disciples followed Jesus, they fully made themselves his disciples. They entered into a new realm, and that's when eternal life began for them. They were doing God's will in their lives on earth as it already was in heaven (as The Lord's Prayer says). Jesus began to teach them the importance of seeking first his kingdom:

Don't worry about these things, saying, "What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?" These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.

—MATTHEW 6:31-33

For Jesus (and his disciples as they grew in their faith), the kingdom of God was central to eternal life. That's why it was part of the Good News he preached.

The Discipleship Gospel (a.k.a. The Kingdom Gospel)

Through his many parables, Jesus worked out the implications of the kingdom into every facet of life, yet the full reality of the kingdom was still somewhat of a mystery, even after Jesus' resurrection. Luke's words in Acts 1:6-7 reveal to us: "[The apostles] kept asking him, 'Lord, has the time come for you to free Israel and restore our kingdom?' He replied, 'The Father alone has the authority to set those dates and times, and they are not for you to know.'"

Many a disciple has wanted the kingdom in all its fullness right now. Even Jesus was in the same position as his followers, in a sense, because he didn't know when the kingdom would be fully restored, yet he longed to usher in the kingdom in the present. Luke shares the account of Jesus crying out over Jerusalem:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn't let me. And now, look, your house is abandoned. And you will never see me again until you say, "Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

—LUKE 13:34-35

Despite Jesus' cries, his Hebraic world said "no" to the kingdom, and God responded, "Okay, no kingdom for you now, not yet—but I will be back!" The church—comprised of Jews and Gentiles who have become one in Christ—experiences the blessings of the kingdom that Christ inaugurated during his first coming. The apostles themselves were a bit confused about this whole thing, and as we saw above in Acts 1, they asked Jesus for a definitive answer at the very last moment before he ascended.

Where Is the Kingdom of God?

The main thing to remember about kingdom talk is that we don't know many specifics about the kingdom. The restoration of the kingdom referenced in Acts 1:6-7 obviously had something to do with military and political power. The Jews of the time wanted political liberation from the Romans. The apostles asked about the kingdom restoration even though none of them could remember a time when Israel was free from the Roman yoke. Jesus' message of the kingdom fulfilled their longings, but not in the ways they expected.

The Discipleship Gospel

Jesus not only led people into the kingdom; he also showed them what it looked like. He explained it to the general populace and demonstrated it daily in his teachings and works. When Jesus arrived at his hometown of Nazareth, for example, he went to the synagogue and made his announcement in a straightforward and startling way. He began by reading from the Isaiah scroll:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come.” He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. Then he began to speak to them. The scripture you’ve just heard has been fulfilled this very day!

—LUKE 4:16-21

Jesus’ fellow Nazarenes in the synagogue seemed to appreciate his words. In fact, they were amazed that a young man from such humble origins could be so bright, so professional. Jesus, however, was a contrarian by nature. Other rabbis would have taken in the accolades and ended there, but not Jesus. He knew them too well—he knew their pride and their prejudice. So he pressed into their unspoken criticism: “You will undoubtedly quote me this proverb: ‘Physician, heal yourself’—meaning, ‘Do miracles here in your hometown like those you did in Capernaum.’ But I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his own hometown” (Luke 4:23-24).

Of course, this statement alone wasn’t what got under the skin of the city fathers; his historical reference about prejudice sparked their ire:

Certainly there were many needy widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the heavens were closed for three and a half years, and severe famine devastated the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them. He was sent instead to a foreigner—a widow of Zarephath in the land of Sidon. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, but the only one healed was Naaman, a Syrian.

—LUKE 4:25-27

This Scripture passage implies that the citizens of Nazareth will not see the miracles in their village because they will not honor its native son as the anointed one, the messiah. They will only get a small bit of the good that

could have been theirs through humility and faith. Jesus was saying to them, “God will send me, the Son of God, to other places, where minds are open and hearts prepared.” His accusation angered them: “When they heard this, the people in the synagogue were furious” (Luke 4:28-30).

Luke’s account reveals that people easily rejected Jesus and his kingdom, but the kingdom of God is where God’s will is done. Jesus told the disciples that God would send him to other places, even—and maybe especially—to Gentile regions. He would, as Elijah and Elisha did, bless the unwashed and despised Syrians because they were more open to God than the Jews.⁸ God’s will could not be done in Nazareth; it could, however, be done in other places—more unlikely places. Those unlikely places were the land of the unwashed, the half-breeds, and outcasts.

Discipleship Isn’t Optional

The contemporary church is quite human and behaves very much like Jesus’ fellow Nazarenes. The kingdom of God has had as much trouble getting underway in the contemporary church as it did when Jesus did great work in his hometown. The citizens of Nazareth couldn’t see beyond the boy Jesus to the messiah Jesus. They were so prejudiced against God showing any favor to any group other than them that they were ready to kill him. As humans, we tend to take the blessings of the gospel—which should lead us to receiving Christ’s love and sharing it with others—and instead hoard them selfishly (even violently!) for ourselves. Doing this distorts the gospel from being others-focused to being self-focused.

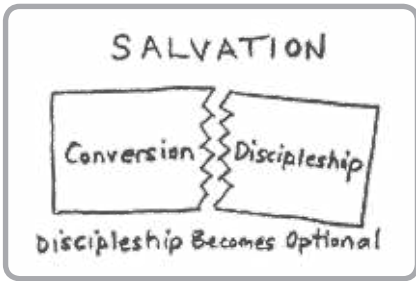
The church’s greatest barrier toward thriving today is that she believes in distortions of the gospel. This comes, in part, because of what we preach (and what we leave out of our preaching). The most common gospel preached in the developed world—in places like the United States, Canada, Western Europe, parts of Africa and Asia, Australia, and New Zealand—is the forgiveness-only, consumer gospel. The problem with this gospel is that it’s only part of the truth.

Gospel Distortions

Many of those in the developing world, however, don’t quite have it down either. In our experience, the most common gospel in underdeveloped

countries is the prosperity gospel, which makes discipleship almost impossible to teach as an essential part of the Good News. This kind of gospel turns everyone into a consumer of religious goods and services.

Neither version—neither the forgiveness-only gospel nor the prosperity gospel—includes discipleship as a normative part of what it means to be saved. Both gospels make no room for the ways and means of the kingdom that Jesus



passed on to his followers. Neither has a serious connection to character transformation, and neither really expects everyone who is “saved” to actually follow Jesus. Moreover, these “gospels” don’t set the precedent for making disciples who make disciples. The idea that every believer in Christ

is a follower of Christ is not a common part of the theology, programs, or curricula of these churches.⁹ In other words, both of these gospels have a fatal flaw—they separate conversion from discipleship, thus making discipleship optional.

Through our work with The Bonhoeffer Project, a community of people and resources bent on helping participants to become disciple-making leaders, we have made a lot of noise in speeches and in print about two important statements that are both vital to the message of this book:¹⁰

- You can’t make a Christlike disciple from a non-discipleship gospel.
- The gospel you preach determines the disciples you make.

These statements show us that even a very aggressive missional effort over the next fifty years that preaches a gospel to the ends of the earth would leave Jesus still waiting to return if it’s the wrong gospel. Jesus said, “The Good News about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so that all nations will hear it; and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14).

False gospels say, in one way or another, “Jesus died for your sins, he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, and he will return someday to gather his church. Everyone who has agreed with this set of religious facts is a Christian. By the way, you don’t need to do anything about it; in fact, you can’t do anything about it because it is all by grace.”

As the late theologian and author Dallas Willard once quipped, “We have not only been saved by grace, we have been paralyzed by it.”¹¹ The church today is truly paralyzed, and it’s largely because of a contorted view—even deification—of grace. As a whole, the church lacks commitment to making

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disciples through its ordinary members on a global scale. Leaders do not expect us to make and multiply disciples, so we're not doing it. As long as we preach the wrong gospel, Jesus' work won't be completed; only a small fraction of lives will be changed.

Non-discipleship gospels may be advanced through various powerful forms of media, but they won't multiply and transform lives of disciples who make still more disciples. These gospels can't do it. The ways and means that Jesus prescribed have not changed. To see reproduction and multiplication, we need people with "discipleship DNA." They must have this DNA, no substitutes. Converts as far as the eye can see will never accomplish what a few committed and multiplying disciples can do when given enough time.

If the church continues down the path it's on, the world will be awash with nominal Christians shaped by a gospel that doesn't reproduce, doesn't transform, and doesn't represent the truth. False gospels will insulate and corrupt nations, and those gospels will fail to accomplish God's will.

When the true gospel is preached to all nations, however, Jesus said the end would come: "All nations will hear it; and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). Disciples who make other disciples, who in turn make still more disciples multiplied throughout the earth, will preach this gospel. The Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard has a pertinent observation here: "The main difference between an apostle and a genius is that a genius does not speak with authority but has to rely on skill."¹²

The spread of this gospel will come from ordinary people with the authority of the gospel. These people will accomplish more than what the most innovative and technologically savvy group of genius Christians without gospel authority could ever fathom. As we hold up the gospel that Jesus preached, we have power to penetrate every part of society and every corner of the earth. Let's start today by truly understanding the gospel, then proclaiming it broadly into a world of men and women who desperately need all that God has to offer—including the call to follow Jesus in obedience.