

BILL HULL

Foreword by Scot McKnight

CONVERS **ON** **OTHER** **PLESHIP**
YOU CAN'T HAVE ONE
WITHOUT THE **& DISC**

A Discipleship•org Resource

What Is the Gospel?

The word “gospel” simply means good news.² The word occurs over ninety times in the New Testament and is a translation of the Greek noun *euangelion*. Both the noun and the verb form, *euangelizo*, are derived from the noun *angelos*, which is often translated “messenger.” “An *angelos* was one who brought a message of victory or political news that brought joy.”³ We should note there is nothing inherently religious in the word gospel itself.

Though the word translated “gospel” can be found alone at times, it is most often accompanied by a modifier. Among the most common are “the gospel of God” (Mark 1:14), “the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1), “the gospel of his Son” (Rom. 1:9), “the gospel of the kingdom” (Matt. 4:23), “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24), “the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4), “the gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15), and “an eternal gospel” (Rev. 14:6).⁴ These modifiers give us a sense of the content of the good news, that it is of God, of Jesus Christ, of the kingdom, and that it relates to grace, peace, and glory in some way.

Yet the power of context is even more helpful than these simple adjectives. Reading about the gospel in the context of a broader description by the apostle Paul helps us grasp the meaning and content of the gospel in a person’s life: “For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, ‘it is through faith that a righteous person has life’” (Rom. 1:16–17 NLT).

Here we see Paul launching into a grand description of the gospel that continues until his magnificent pivot point in Romans 12:1–2. There he turns to the practical application of the gospel’s power to change a person’s life when he says, “And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you” (Rom. 12:1 NLT). The gospel that Paul speaks about captures God’s work from creation to consummation—nothing important is left out. Paul’s letter to the Romans concludes with practical teaching on how the gospel’s power and wisdom propel us through even the most mundane experiences of religious community life.⁵

The structure of the gospel is best displayed in 1 Corinthians 15:1–8, which serves as a helpful, concise summary of the gospel. Paul reminds his followers of the core message in light of the resurrection: “Let me now remind you, dear brothers and sisters, of the Good News I preached to you before. You welcomed it then, and you still stand firm in it. It is this Good

News that saves you if you continue to believe the message I told you—unless, of course, you believed something that was never true in the first place” (1 Cor. 15:1–2 NLT).

Paul reminds us that believing something and standing firm in it are the same thing. His words indicate that belief is more than mere agreement or intellectual assent; belief involves existential living as a demonstration of belief. Paul includes a somewhat cryptic phrase, “unless, of course, you believed something that was never true in the first place.” He may be referring to a belief in the gospel without the hope of the resurrection or to belief in a different “gospel,” one corrupted by his enemies or rivals. Paul then speaks of the origin of this gospel message and its importance: “I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me” (1 Cor. 15:3a NLT). He wants us to understand that the gospel is not his, something he made up or created. He does not have permission or authority to make up the gospel or to write his own version of it. The gospel is something that is received, passed on, and entrusted to others. It is not to be edited, adorned, or removed from its proper context, here referring to the resurrection.⁶ Receiving the gospel and passing it on—unchanged—is the only way to preserve it from corruption.

The skeleton structure Paul gives us in this passage has three parts: Christ died, Christ was buried, and Christ was raised.

1. *Christ died.* “*Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said*” (1 Cor. 15:3 NLT). “Just as the Scriptures said” is shorthand for the writings of the Old Testament. In particular, Paul is thinking of the predictions of the coming Messiah, the promises God gave to Abraham, David, and others that were fulfilled in the birth and work of Christ. When Jesus was born and formally began his ministry, he presented the full revelation of God to the world. My point here is to remind us that before Jesus died, he lived. Ninety percent of his time on earth he lived in obscurity—not exactly a strategy designed for impact. Yet in three short years, he rocked the world in which he lived and started a movement that continues today.

Jesus’ death meant something far more than most deaths because of *who* he was: God incarnate. His death had greater meaning because of his godly heritage⁷ and because those closest to him considered him sinless.⁸ In another passage, Paul interprets Jesus’ death to mean something that all Israel should have understood: “For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ” (2 Cor. 5:21 NLT).

When Paul proclaimed “Christ died,” he meant several additional things that are a result of Jesus’ death. Because Jesus was the appointed one,

chosen by God as a substitute, he took the penalty of sin in place of all who are guilty by birth through Adam's curse. Why God decided on this plan is not explained here. But we have the simple revelation that Christ died for us and that his death in some way satisfied God's requirements for humans to be reconciled with him.⁹ A living Christ was both chosen and volunteered to give up his life. This is where the gospel begins.

2. *Christ was buried* (1 Cor. 15:4). At first, this second point may seem incidental. You might think, "Of course he was buried. Why mention it?" But Paul includes this point because it establishes that Christ really was dead, locked away in a tomb with a two-ton stone wedged against the opening and a Roman guard making sure no one would steal his body. Jesus himself claimed that he would be in the earth for three days and nights and then would be raised.¹⁰ So part of authenticating Jesus' words and life and establishing the truth of the promise he fulfilled is verifying his death. Yes, Christ was buried. He really died. And as we shall see, he was truly raised from death.

3. *Christ was resurrected*. "He was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said" (1 Cor. 15:4). Again, the phrase "just as the Scriptures said" refers to all of the messianic promises God made, starting with his statement to the serpent that the deliverer would strike a fatal blow to his head while he would wound his heel.¹¹ However, the fact that Jesus experienced a verifiable death and burial does not hold much meaning for us without the final act, his resurrection. And resurrection is only an abstraction without appearances and eyewitnesses. Paul chronicles Jesus' appearances to Peter, the twelve, and more than five hundred others and explicitly states that many of these five hundred could verify to Paul's original readers what they saw (1 Cor. 15:5-6). Paul even mentions James and himself as among those who saw Jesus after his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7-8).

These three points are the skeletal structure of the gospel. The remainder of 1 Corinthians 15 is devoted to explaining the significance of the resurrection and includes the fact that Jesus will one day return and subject all things to himself.¹² The resurrection naturally leads to the return of Christ, the consummation of the gospel and the believer's blessed hope for the future.

But the story of the gospel is not over yet! The good news for today is that because of what Christ has done, we will one day see God eliminate sin, free us from the distress of living in a broken world, give justice, creating a new, eternal world. These truths, guaranteed by the resurrection, should bring great joy for all who have placed their hope in Christ.

THE KINGDOM GOSPEL

What we can call the kingdom gospel best captures the preaching of Jesus and the early church. This is the gospel first announced by John the Baptist: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matt. 3:2). Jesus preached this gospel as well: “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). Right up to his ascension, Jesus’ disciples expected him to establish the kingdom.²¹ The early church also expected this throughout the thirty years after, right up to Paul’s last days. “For the next two years, Paul lived in Rome at his own expense. He welcomed all who visited him, boldly proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. And no one tried to stop him” (Acts 28:30–31 NLT). Jesus promised that this gospel of “the Good News about the Kingdom will be preached through the whole world, so that all nations will hear it; and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14).

What is the kingdom gospel? *It is the proclamation of the rule and reign of Christ over all of life.* This good news began with his deliverance of ancient Israel and his promises to save human kind from the kingdom of darkness, despair, sin, and death through a Messiah. It is the announcement that the promised Messiah has come as Jesus, who is the long-expected king who will sit on God’s throne. Through him we have access to eternal life, and we come under his rule by following him and becoming his disciples. From him we learn how to live our lives to the fullest. The good news is that it doesn’t matter if we are Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female.

Jesus came for us. He lived for us, died for us, was raised from the dead for us, and will return for us and reconcile all things to himself. Those who follow him will live in his presence, under his rule. Those who reject him will eternally exist apart from his loving presence, which is called hell—the best God can do for those who don't like him or desire to be with him.

How do we enter this kingdom of God? Entrance has always been the same. Jesus has invited us to follow him, and he is the entrance to the kingdom. So start walking! We enter by accepting him as our rabbi and our king. We agree to learn from him by following his teaching, submitting to his direction, and praying for his help and provision. As we do, we grow to know him and love him, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, we start to become like him.

Mark Twain once said, "The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why."²⁴ The kingdom gospel tells us why we were born—for the kingdom of God. The kingdom is the realm of God's effective will, where his will is done, and it has arrived. His will is becoming a reality in the lives of those who follow Jesus and who make up his body, the church.

While the kingdom gospel speaks of forgiveness of sin and eternal life, it is about more than forgiveness, where we will go after we die, or how to get into heaven. It is about more than self-interest, and more than trying to create a better world that fits our political or religious perspectives. Unlike the aforementioned gospels, the kingdom gospel includes a call to self-denial. It is focused on giving ourselves for the sake of others rather than on becoming financially prosperous or satisfied religious consumers.

In short, the kingdom gospel calls us to discipleship. Being a disciple of Jesus, learning from him and submitting to his leading and his teaching, is the norm rather than the exception or the option. It calls us to become apprentices of Christ and learn from him how to live our life as though he were living it. If he were a plumber, what kind of plumber would he be? If he were an accountant, what kind of accountant would he be? This is the gospel for real life.

Dallas Willard speaks of the power of this gospel in his classic work, *The Divine Conspiracy*:

If [Jesus] were to come today as he did then, he could carry out his mission through most any decent and useful occupation. He could be a clerk or accountant in a hardware store, a computer repairman, a banker, an editor, doctor, waiter, teacher, farmhand, lab technician, or construction worker. He could run a housecleaning service or repair automobiles.

Second, the kingdom gospel teaches us to obey God by living intentionally in the middle of diversity and ambiguity. Jesus uses another parable to liken life in the kingdom to a farmer who planted some wheat, but then weeds grew up with the wheat. The wheat and weeds were so intermingled that the farmer couldn't pull the weeds without destroying the wheat. To get any harvest, the two had to be allowed to grow up side-by-side and then separated at harvest time when both were cut down. Jesus explains that the wheat plants are his followers and the weeds are the disciples of the enemy. In the end the angels will separate the two, and off to their respective abodes they will go, wheat to heaven and the weeds to life without God.²⁷

Following Jesus requires us to live next to those who do not believe or follow our King. It also means we have an obligation to love them as Christ has modeled for us. We are not charged with determining and declaring who is in the kingdom and who is out. Only an omniscient being is able to do this, and we are clearly not qualified. We are simply to live and love, pray and tell, and some of those weeds will develop ears to hear. The strategy is that if we live among them, we have access. The institutional church does not have the same degree of access or opportunities that its members have every day.

Third, the kingdom gospel reminds us that growth is slow but will ultimately permeate everything. Jesus uses two illustrations to explain how his plan is in all of life, a mustard seed and yeast in bread. A mustard seed is small, but it grows so large that it can provide birds with shade and even a home. This illustration reminds us of many Christians who started with only a helping hand but went on to build orphanages and hospitals. The mustard plant is like the Red Cross, or Christians who help when disaster strikes, or those with a Christian legacy.

Yeast, of course, permeates an entire loaf. Jesus' point is that like yeast, his word spreads in a quiet way, but once it does, it cannot be stopped any more than yeast can be removed from a loaf to keep it from rising. Like yeast, the King's disciples must be worked into the middle of the community to have the greatest contact and impact.

How Do We Participate?

The kingdom gospel proclaims what God has done and is doing. But it also demands a response from us. We must enter the kingdom. How? By repenting, receiving forgiveness of our sin, and following Jesus. Then we are rescued from the domain of darkness and transferred into the *kingdom* of the beloved son (Col. 1:13). But we must become apprentices of Jesus and learn from him how to live our lives. "If you have a Christ without

a kingdom, you don't have a Christ. And if you have a kingdom without Christ, you don't have the Kingdom of God."²⁸

Jesus describes life in his kingdom as like a treasure that a man discovers.²⁹ When he realizes what it is worth, there is nothing he won't give up to have it. In a slightly different way, Jesus likens life in his kingdom to a precious pearl.³⁰ It is so valuable, you would sell everything to own it. The idea of a kingdom is somewhat foreign to our mental template today. Especially for those of us living in the United States, the idea of submitting in obedience to the authority of one sovereign ruler does not sit well with our cultural values. We can accept the idea of a personal relationship with someone. But we may reject the wider social and global implications of the kingdom gospel.

To keep the gospel from being reduced to our personal spiritual experience, we must accept it all. The world will not be shaken by people whose most radical thought is that they will get to heaven someday. Many religions posit some type of afterlife. But the kingdom gospel is unique because it makes global, universal claims. It proclaims that Christ offers all people entry into his kingdom and that all people, everywhere, at all times, must answer to him. Like yeast, his growth strategy is organic, permeating the entire loaf of bread. The kingdom gospel is a call to be a disciple of the King, to learn from him. Jesus' first disciples serve as our example. He asked them, "Do you understand these things?"

"Yes," they said, "we do."

"Then he added, 'Every teacher of religious law who becomes a disciple in the Kingdom of Heaven is like a homeowner who brings from his store-room new gems of truth as well as old'" (Matt. 13:51–52 NLT).

Under the instruction of the Messiah himself, King Jesus, these uneducated men gained new insight into the world, new gems of truth, and understood the old gems given in the Old Testament. They became religious teachers who could explain the whole gospel story from Genesis to Revelation. These disciples were counting on the immediate fulfillment of all the promises of the kingdom.³¹ But Jesus told them that the time for the fulfillment was not yet. Then he commanded these trained teachers to be filled with his Spirit, become his witnesses, and take his message to the entire world.

THINK SAINTS, NOT STEEPLES

When we think of a kingdom, most of us think in terms of geography. We envision highways, mountains, deserts, cities, and farms. So when we think of God's kingdom, we tend to think of special spaces or properties

set apart by God's people for worship, of buildings with a steeple or cross on the roof. We think that to enter God's kingdom, people must enter one of these spaces, and we believe God is most active and likely to work in this sacred space.

Yet this concept is too limiting and has largely failed us. Jesus' commission to his disciples is not to have people to come to us but for us to go to them. He told us to "Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone" (Mark 16:15 NLT). His focus is not buildings—it's people.

When you think of a region, state, or city, picture circular lights representing the disciples of Jesus. We can see these lights everywhere, in every domain of society. They are at city hall and in state capitals and in many homes, malls, and schools. In fact, we would have difficulty finding a place they are not stationed.

Some of these lights are flickering while others burn brightly. The job of our churches is to get those lights to all burn brightly, to activate the Christian population already in place. We do so by reminding, encouraging, and teaching these Christians to believe in and commit to the kingdom gospel. This commitment is best summarized by Jesus in two simple words: follow me.

Jesus' offer comes with the promise that he will teach us how to live the way God made us to live, in obedience to him. Teaching people to obey his commands is not only teaching them what they ought to do. It is also teaching them how to think, feel, and be. The teachings of Jesus speak to the intellect but also to the heart and imagination and give a new vision of reality that changes the way we relate to people, to God, and to the world.

Are Christians and Disciples the Same?

Given that for decades the church has separated discipleship from salvation, we need to ask the question: Are Christians and disciples the same? At first, this question seems to be about the meaning of words, but it is really about expectations. A disciple is a learner, a student of someone. The term implies action and obedience. The term Christian, however, tends to refer to a status or position. Early skeptics used it largely as a term of derision to describe followers of Jesus, and it occurs only three times in the New Testament.¹² For many, the primary requirement for being a Christian is agreement with Christian doctrine.

A Christian is expected to *be* something; a disciple is expected to *do* something. When Jesus invited people to follow him, he asked them to "come and see" (John 1:39 NLT), and then later to "come, follow me" (Matt. 4:19). When Jesus chose the twelve disciples, his invitation was to come and

be with him (Mark 3:13). These calls required an active response. The term *disciple* has a built-in expectation that *Christian* does not. Scottish writer George MacDonald explained this difference well: "Instead of asking yourself whether you believe or not, ask yourself whether you have this day done one thing because he said, do it, or once abstained because he said, do not do it. It is simply absurd to say you believe, or even want to believe in him if you do not do anything he tells you."³¹

We can biblically say that all who actively follow Jesus (disciples) also believe in him, and that their belief is sufficient to save them. Therefore I think it is safe to say that every disciple of Jesus is a Christian. But it is not always safe to assume that every person labeled Christian is a disciple, because a professing "Christian" who does not follow Jesus is no Christian at all. Some use the term "nominal Christian," meaning one who is Christian in name only, to describe such people. Let's take a closer look what makes the difference in the teachings of Jesus and Paul.

WHAT DOES JESUS TEACH?

When someone asked Jesus how to receive eternal life, Jesus answered in terms of repentance and discipleship: "Follow me and I will make you to become fishers of men."³⁴ When Jesus was asked, "What must I do to receive eternal life?" Jesus replied, "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?" The man answered, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself." "Right!" Jesus told him, "Do this and you will live!"³⁵

Jesus called upon people to act, to put away one set of behaviors and turn to another. Jesus linked faith in him with action. At the end of his most famous sermon, Jesus continued to build his case for a righteousness that exceeded that of the Pharisees preoccupation with behavioral markers: "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. On judgment day many will say to me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' But I will reply, 'I never knew you, Get away from me, you who break God's laws.'"³⁶

The Middle Eastern or Hebraic way of understanding belief always connects it to action. Even John's gospel, which is commonly thought of as a gospel of belief, largely relates the words and works of Jesus.³⁷ "Jesus said to the people who believed in him, 'You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will

set you free.” John’s gospel presents the verb “believe” more than thirty times, and in each case that belief is connected to eternal life. But again, we need to understand that this belief means more than mere agreement or intellectual assent; it includes an active response. In some cases, it means to abide or to be in fellowship with another: “Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me and I in them will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. But if you remain in me and my works remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted!”³⁸

In his gospel, John tells us the history of Jesus, and in his epistles, John is a teacher of practical wisdom.

We can be sure that we know him if we obey his commandments. If someone claims, “I know God,” but doesn’t obey God’s commandments, that person is a liar and is not living in the truth.

—1 JOHN 2:3–4 NLT

If anyone claims, “I am living in the light,” but hates a fellow believer, that person is still living in darkness.

—1 JOHN 2:9 NLT

If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need, but shows no compassion—how can God’s love be in that person?

—1 JOHN 3:17 NLT

John confirms that being a believer means more than saying a prayer, reciting a creed, or being an expert on the teachings of Jesus. Believers love, serve, and help others, or they are not members of the community of Jesus’ followers. Jesus’ teachings on belief and actions are also connected to the final judgment. Consider John 5:26–30 for example: “Don’t be so surprised! Indeed, the time is coming when all the dead in their graves will hear the voice of God’s Son, and they will rise again. Those who have done good will rise to experience eternal life, and those who have continued in evil will rise to experience judgment. I can do nothing on my own. I judge as God tells me. Therefore, my judgment is just, because I carry out the will of the one who sent me, not my own will” (Matt. 7:21–23 NLT).

Both the Synoptic Gospels and the gospel of John teach us that belief embraces discipleship. In the synoptics, Jesus teaches a gospel of repentance, a call to follow and do. And John’s gospel does the same, just in a

different way. In both cases, following Jesus is a demonstration of what faith really is, a belief strong enough to create action.

JESUS AND PAUL

The apostle Paul clearly emphasizes that one becomes a Christian by faith and not by works of the law.³⁹ There is some discussion about what Paul meant by works of the law, but our immediate question is this: does Paul equate belief with being a disciple of Jesus?

Based on his own account in Galatians, Jesus taught Paul the gospel himself.⁴⁰ Paul also met with Jesus' disciples in Jerusalem, so he would have known about Jesus' command to follow him and to make disciples throughout the earth. Paul wrote Romans around the same time that the Synoptics were written. So he would have written Romans and Galatians with the knowledge of their clear call to discipleship. Paul was careful not to alter the gospel he was given to present to the Gentiles. He made it clear that he wasn't going to change his story or his gospel that agreed with what Jesus and the apostles taught, and that everyone should beware of the dangers of other gospels.⁴¹

Some have tried to drive a wedge between what they call Jesus' discipleship model of the gospel and Paul's transaction model. A helpful discussion on this topic is Robert Picirilli's *Discipleship: The Expression of Saving Faith*.⁴² According to Picirilli, Paul's transactional model teaches that if people believe on Christ alone, they are saved. This model has been elevated in modern Christian culture to be the pristine and time-proven way to salvation. Its greatest support are Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians, and its greatest champions are Protestant churches. The transaction model describes salvation as primarily a judicial decision that is settled for good. It follows the emphasis of the Protestant Reformation in putting justification by faith at the center. Justification is a key aspect of the gospel, but the weakness of the transactional model is that the gospel is preached without calls to discipleship and ongoing transformation.

This aberration is not what Paul taught. He spoke a great deal about the necessity of learning and training in the Christian life.⁴³ Paul was clear that his work was to teach and exhort everyone to grow up into maturity in Christ.⁴⁴ In Romans 12, we see Paul begin to emphasize this point, and what he describes is clearly discipleship: "And so dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way

you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect" (Rom. 12:1–2 NLT).

Paul also teaches accountability and covenantal living to help others—the rebellious and unruly, the timid, and the weak—to keep their commitments to God. "Brothers and sisters, we urge you to warn those who are lazy. Encourage those who are timid. Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone" (1 Thess. 5:14 NLT). Paul also teaches the importance of teaching others to spread the gospel. "You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others" (2 Tim. 2:2 NLT).

Though they use different words and expressions, Paul teaches what Jesus teaches, that discipleship is essential for believers. When Paul teaches justification by faith alone in Christ alone, he is also teaching that the life of discipleship is the fruit of our salvation in Christ.

Two-Tiered System

What has been the result in our churches of dividing salvation and discipleship?

In recent years, Christians have been divided into two categories. At the core of this division is the idea that salvation has two parts. First, a person receives Christ as savior. Sometime later, they submit to him as Lord. This understanding has led to the existence of a two-tiered Christian population: those who are saved and just waiting for heaven and those who are serious about their faith.

Practically, this two-tiered system has created an expectation that many Christians will languish and never bear any fruit or multiply thirty, sixty, or hundred fold.⁴⁵ Because we expect this, we create programs around it. In fact, we may intentionally avoid urging people to study the Bible and act on their faith because these discipleship activities can be interpreted as legalism. We call our church members Christians but refrain from calling them disciples because that term refers to a deeper level of commitment. The biblical terms used to describe believers—followers, disciples, slaves, and servants of Christ—seem much too serious for many church-goers.

We need to reject this two-tiered system. We need to return to biblical labels and speak in biblical ways about the connection between conversion and discipleship and by doing so reclaim this lost understanding of salvation.