



# The Gospel of the Kingdom

Based on a message preached by John D. Martin



## Introduction

This message takes us straight to the core of the matter. And what is that “matter”? The “matter” is the distinction between the gospel of the kingdom and the typical “gospel” message that is preached in your average “Street Corner Evangelical Church” in North America.

A few have written us over the last few years with sincere questions about this distinction, which we have tried to bring out in articles in previous issues. For those who are struggling to see the difference between the typical modern “gospel” message and the gospel as preached in the early church and historic Anabaptism (and other groups), we recommend a thorough contemplation of this article.

This article presents the core. If you cannot “see” this article, you will never fully grasp what we have been saying in previous articles about the encroaching distortion of the gospel message in our churches. We could well title this article, “Gospel 101.”

## Detour!

My concern for this message is to expose a detour that our Anabaptist churches took in the past century. As I was growing up, the message that I heard was what I call a “save ME gospel.” Now the term “kingdom of God” was used very loosely—as it is in many church circles—but I don’t think I ever heard, in all my growing up years, a message specifically on the kingdom. In this message I want to make it very clear what the kingdom of God is.

It is *not* about us! That is where the problem came in the shift of focus when I was growing up. The main thing in the messages that I heard was “We need to get saved!”

That certainly is true, but “getting saved” is a means to an end; *not* an end in itself. Unfortunately, “getting saved” was made an end in itself, and much of the revival preaching was focused on that end. Therefore, I would like to make it clear what the original gospel of Jesus Christ really was.

## The original gospel message

The original gospel was the *gospel of the kingdom*. Jesus began His ministry by saying, “Repent ...” Now, the classic words usually following this would be, “... or you will be lost,” or “you will go to hell!”

But Jesus did *not* say that. He said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” In other words, “The kingdom is right there for you to grasp, it’s at hand.” Six verses later, after calling His first four disciples, it says He “went about all Galilee ... preaching the gospel of the kingdom.” Mt. 4:23 Do you know that Jesus never called the gospel anything else but “the gospel of the kingdom”? In every instance where you find the content of the gospel described, it is “the gospel of the kingdom.” Every time, in the entire gospel record!

Jesus’ two most important statements were the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord’s Prayer. Both of these begin and end with an emphasis on the kingdom of God. “Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of God.” “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.”

Referring to the end of time, Jesus said, “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.” I ask you a searching question: Has the gospel of the kingdom been preached unto the ends of the earth, or has it been a “save ME gospel”?

Now I want to make one thing clear before proceeding: God uses imperfect means. I believe the gospel has been preached in many parts of the world, and despite a wrong emphasis, many people have been reconciled to God.

## Parables of the kingdom

Basically all of Jesus’ parables focus on the kingdom: the kingdom is as a treasure in a field, the kingdom is as a merchant, the kingdom is as a net, the kingdom is as leaven, the kingdom is as a mustard seed ...

I want to ask you a question: If I were to ask you what the seed was in the parable of the sower, what would you say?

[Response from someone in the audience: “The Word of God!”]

That’s what most people say! And that is true in a general sense, but *specifically* it says it is the “word of

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*the kingdom*”! I never noticed that until recently. We are so used to reading our Bible through certain lenses. Six months ago I would have probably said the same thing [as the responder from the audience.] When Jesus interprets the parable of the

tares, He says the seed is “the children *of the kingdom*.” That excites me!

Here I am, speaking to approximately 400 seeds! What should happen is that all you seeds will go out there and be planted and grow up to be a kingdom expression of the gospel! Not just a personal experience of people getting ready to go to heaven, but a kingdom expression of the gospel should grow up around every kingdom Christian. Because you are the “seed of the kingdom.”

## The kingdom in church history

But, when we turn to the history of the church, it is not very far along before we see a drastic change in focus. How many of you can recite the “Apostles’ Creed”? [A few raise hands.] Tell me, what is the word that the Apostles’ Creed begins with?

“I.”

That’s interesting! The Lord’s Prayer begins with “*Our Father*.” Neither the Apostles’ Creed nor any of those other major creeds after the first centuries say a single thing about the kingdom. Only the Creed of Constantinople says at the end, “... and He shall come again to judge the living and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.” It places the kingdom “out there” somewhere in the future, but says nothing about its present reality.

The result of losing the kingdom centrality in the gospel is a difference in a person’s outlook. If the focus is on ME, then the preaching I heard all my life was truly “gospel preaching,” where the most important thing in the world is for me to “get saved.” And before I proceed, I want to make it clear that “getting saved” is a very important thing, and heaven and hell are two very important realities we must resolve in the right way.

But that is *not* God’s most important concern for the present age. What God wants is a *corporate expression, a society of the redeemed*. Thus, personal salvation is an important *means to an end* and not an end in itself. God cannot express His kingdom until He has redeemed people that He can use to *show to everyone what the whole world would be like if everybody obeyed the King!*

That’s what Christianity is all about. We are talking about community, society, corporate relationships, so that the world looking on can say, “Wow!” It is like what the queen of Sheba said when she saw Solomon’s court: “What a great God they must have! What a beautiful kingdom! I cannot believe what I see! I did not know that human beings could live together this way!”

That’s what kingdom is all about!

But you see, if you concentrate only on your personal salvation and you don’t really make the kingdom to be the heart of your gospel—as did Jesus, Paul, and the others labored to teach it—then you have individual Christians who have no vision for submission to a corporate practice. I wonder just what the world looking on does see?

## The great paradigm shift

Now, I stand here guilty with all of you; we have all been involved in this paradigm shift. It is because we have not been taught that *the end of our salvation is to be involved in something larger than ourselves*.

The kingdom of God is the society of the redeemed. As I mentioned, this gospel of the kingdom was lost in the early centuries to an individualistic salvation. And during the last century Anabaptism swallowed it also, and we wonder why we have so much individualism now. It is the fruit of a distorted gospel. We need to get back—it is a burden of my heart—to the kingdom gospel, instead of a “save ME gospel.”

Jesus used the word “kingdom” (in reference to the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God) at least 124 times, and He never referred to the gospel as anything else. If Jesus focused on the kingdom, then that is the centrality of His message, not a marginal issue. He said, “I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also: for therefore am I sent.” Lk. 4:43 He tells us very explicitly why He came—to preach the kingdom!

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## Gospel distortions

Is the kingdom ever taught today? Well, in dispensationalist circles, the kingdom is to happen somewhere off in the future. You know, I think the Devil has used every strategy he can think of to get the focus off the kingdom. I really do! So the dispensationalist has put the kingdom off into the future ... it is coming. This makes Jesus' teaching irrelevant for today. That is what some people do with the teaching about the kingdom.

Other people, such as Augustine and Calvin, made the kingdom the central theme of their teaching, but it was a carnal kingdom ruled by force. Thus we have these two distortions, two wrong concepts, of the kingdom of God. So the message is lost.

Why did Jesus focus His message on the kingdom of God? Because that was God's original purpose; that is why man was created. Salvation was *not* the main theme of God's original work with man. Man was not "lost" when he was created. God created man so that he would have dominion and express God's authority on this earth.

The first use of the word kingdom in the Bible is in Exodus 19:6, where it states, "And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests ..." That makes it very clear what serving God is all about.

We are mediating God's rule on earth. He is the King; we are simply His subjects expressing His rule and authority, first of all in our own lives and fellowships, and then to the conscience of the world around us. Notice God says "ye shall be unto *me*," not unto us (as humans) a kingdom of priests. The purpose of the kingdom is to show God's benevolent rule, through us.

The world does not understand God. When they think about God, they view Him as a negative entity, as some sort of grumpy sovereign out there who enjoys giving lots of rules to make life hard ... His ways are not good, and if you follow them, you will never be happy. That is the world's concept of God. Therefore God's purpose is that through this society of the redeemed, this little colony of heaven on earth, the world would get a glimpse of His

true attractive character and have a desire to respond properly to Him.

Now the Devil has perverted the idea of the kingdom, which is why people have difficulty with it. Some leaders have perverted the idea of God's kingdom and left a bad taste in our mouth. In the Old Testament, God initially wanted all men to be that kingdom of priests, but this purpose got lost, so He chose a nation. We will not take the time to do so now, but it is an interesting study to go through the Old Testament and see what God wanted to do with that nation. He told them, "I want to lift you up on high, so that all the nations will say, 'What a God they

have! What laws they have! What nation has been more blessed?'" He said, "I will make you the lender and not the borrower. You will be number one among the nations ... *if you keep all of my commandments.*"

You see, that is the only way people will be blessed, by a total surrender. Now, I told you of the fragmentation that has taken place in our churches. We don't understand submission of our lives to God and to each other for the sake of the kingdom of God.

### The kingdom come!

We saw that in the Old Testament that God wanted a kingdom that would demonstrate to the whole world what a nation would look like if God was the King. And only briefly did the world ever see that, under David and somewhat under Solomon. That was it. Then we come into the New Testament.

I want to show you that the preaching of the gospel as being the *gospel of the kingdom* didn't end with Christ. My goal with this message is to make all of you *passionate church builders*. I want you to forget about yourself, and get your relationship with God established, and then *lose yourself in something bigger than yourself!*

Look in Acts 19:8. What did Paul preach? "And he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God." The kingdom of God was Paul's message; it was *not* a "save ME gospel." Now look at Acts 20:25. "And now, behold, I know that ye all,



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among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more.”

I want to ask you another searching question. When you “preach the gospel,” do you preach the kingdom of God? I hope so, and if you haven’t been doing so, I hope you start! Now let’s go to the end of Paul’s life, described in Acts 28:23. “And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God.” Again, we see that *the kingdom* was the message! Then after Paul ends up a prisoner in his own rented house, what is he preaching in the very last verse of Acts? “The kingdom of God!”

Now, I think if Paul’s gospel had been a “save ME gospel” it would not have been stated that way. The coming of the kingdom of God was the message.

## A present reality

This kingdom is a present reality, and the effects of the kingdom show, as in 1 Corinthians 14:23-25. This is what should happen when the kingdom is genuinely expressed.

If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth.

This is the kind of authority that the gathered body has when it is gathered in unity. It is a true kingdom expression of authority. Psalm 89:7 tells us that “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him.”

## The *ekklesia*

What is the church, as denoted by the Greek term *ekklesia*? If you ask most people what that means, they will say, “the called out ones.” My question is, “called out to what?” Are they called out just to enjoy each other’s fellowship?

In Acts 19, when the uproar took place in Ephesus, the town clerk came on the scene and said, “We are going to be criticized for this disorder. If something needs to be resolved, there is a proper order. If anything needs to be done, it shall be determined in a lawful *ekklesia* (assembly).”

If you had gone to a Greek town and asked for the *ekklesia*, they would have taken you to the town council! It was a governing body; *ekklesia* means a body of people *called out to govern* (*guide, lead*). Now suppose you went to the U.S. Congress when they were dismissing, and asked them what had happened that day. Suppose they said, “We had a wonderful fellowship together! We were so encouraged! We had a fellowship meal, and it was a wonderful potluck dinner; you should have seen it! I was so glad I came to Congress, because I was so discouraged, but now I am really inspired!”

You would probably say, “That is not the reason you were supposed to be meeting together! You were *not* supposed to be there for yourself! You were supposed to be there to make good laws for this country, for yourself, for the assembly, and for the whole nation.”

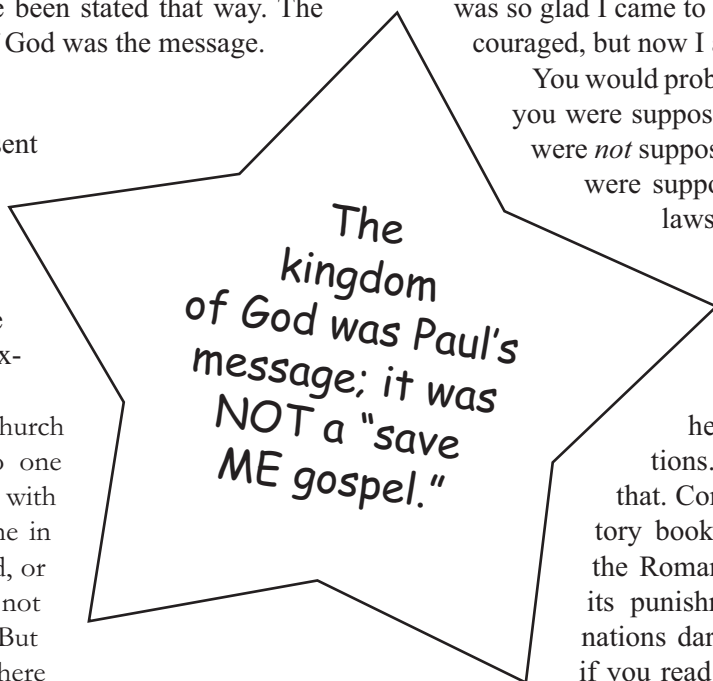
## A kingdom of peace

And that is why *we* are here, to give guidance to the nations. The early church demonstrated that. Concerning the *Pax Romana*,<sup>1</sup> history books tell you that it was because the Roman army was so formidable and its punishments so terrifying that other nations dared not resist Rome’s rule. But if you read the early church writings, you get a different story. They say the reason for those 200 years of peace—which coincided with the first centuries of the church—was that the Prince of Peace had come and established a kingdom of peace, and this kingdom’s prayers and influence were keeping the world at peace! Interestingly, those 200 years of peace ended about the same time that the early church began to lose its practice of nonresistance.

The most tragic compromise the church ever made was its compromise of nonresistance.

Since that time, some of the most horrible things have happened “in the name of Jesus”: the Crusades, the Inquisition, slavery in America, the American Civil War, and World Wars I and II.

<sup>1</sup> Two hundred years of internal peace in the Roman Empire, with no major wars or disruptions.



People say, “What do you do with a man like Hitler?” Well, most of the people in Germany were Lutherans. If the church had never lost its stand on nonresistance, Hitler would have had no army! Almost none of the wars

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of the church has been its testimony of nonresistance. We live in a world that is sick of war, hatred, violence, killing, and all the things that go along with war. To hear that there is a group of people—the Anabaptists—who for 500 years has been able to live together in peace without

in Western civilization would have ever occurred. Do you see now what happened to this kingdom? It got messed up with tragic and unspeakably horrible consequences.

I have to tell you—and I have heard this in testimonies from various people—that the most powerful testimo-

ny of the church has been its testimony of nonresistance. We live in a world that is sick of war, hatred, violence, killing, and all the things that go along with war. To hear that there is a group of people—the Anabaptists—who for 500 years has been able to live together in peace without

the sword is about the most appealing message we could ever give to the world.<sup>2</sup>

I hope that by now you understand what the gospel of the kingdom is: a gospel that says, “Yes, God wants to save human beings and take them to heaven, but the *most important* part is that He wants them to be an expression of His kingdom here on earth.” I will again state my definition of the kingdom of God: *A group of people who show to everyone what the whole world would look like if everybody obeyed the King! ~*

This article is only the first half of the spoken message. The second part shifted the focus toward some practical applications of the kingdom of God. Those desiring to listen to or read the whole sermon may visit <http://www.elcristianismoprimitivo.com/english/embracing-the-gospel-of-the-kingdom.htm> where it is available in video, audio, pdf, mobi, and epub formats for free download.

<sup>2</sup> This testimony has not been without flaws, but it is a marvelous testimony still. And, there have been other groups that have lived out kingdom Christianity through the ages as well.