

The Gospel Jesus Preached

The Gospel before the cross

Have you ever thought about the fact that the Gospel Jesus proclaimed and acted out all took place before Jesus went to the cross? We may not be able to imagine preaching the Gospel without reference to the cross, yet the Gospel Jesus proclaimed did not include, as far as we can tell, references to Him paying the penalty for our sins on the cross!

We might think that Jesus could not speak of His atoning death because it had not yet happened, yet we find that Jesus made numerous references to His coming death and resurrection:

“Surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” (Lk 13:33-35)

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, ‘We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.’ (Lk 18:31-33)

“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matt 12:40)

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead ... But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognise him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” (Matt 17:9-12)

According to the Gospel record, the only time Jesus explained His coming death as an atonement was during the Last Supper:

“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matt 26:28)

This one occurrence proves that Jesus understood His coming death as atonement, yet before the Last Supper He chose not to explain this when He spoke of His death.

Although Jesus referred to His death in various ways He never took the opportunity to explain its role in paying for our sin. He either simply spoke about the event or used it to teach that suffering and persecution was to be expected as the cost of following Him:

“The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. (Lk 9:22-23)

“Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him.’ But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. ‘This is the heir,’ they said. ‘Let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’... He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” (Lk 20:13-16)

We are so used to explaining the Gospel in terms of the cross as an atonement that we may fail to stop and consider the Gospel that Jesus Himself preached. The purpose of this study is to explore Jesus’ Gospel and consider how His example might influence the way we share the Gospel.

Jesus’ Gospel

The Gospel is announced by Jesus very simply, as recorded in Mark 1:15:

“The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

To understand the Gospels and the person and mission of Jesus we need to understand what this simple statement meant to Jesus and his hearers. There are three parts we need to understand:

1. The time has come
2. The kingdom of God is near
3. Repent and believe the good news

The time has come

John's preaching made people expectant:

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. (Lk 3:15)

Jesus' announcement "The time has come" builds on this expectation which was based on many prophecies, spanning the entire period of the Old Testament, concerning a coming new Kingdom of God. Here is a small selection:

"The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him." (De 18:15 NIV)

In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." (Isa 2:2-3)

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever. (Isa 9:6-7)

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle-bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zech 9:9-10)

Prophecies like these gave the Israelites an unquenchable expectation that one day God would visit His chosen people and restore their fortunes under a Godly king in David's line.

The kingdom of God is near

The prophecies did not just point to a new king, but to a whole new covenant with God in a new Kingdom under God's rule:

“The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jer 31:31-34)

“My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. They and their children and their children’s children will live in the Promised Land for ever, and David my servant will be their prince for ever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. ... My dwelling-place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy” (Ezek 37:24-28)

“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour ... You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast. (Isa 61:1-6)

Repent and believe the good news

All these prophecies were given to a disobedient people of God who needed to repent of their waywardness and respond in obedience to the prophet’s message. The expectation produced by the wealth of prophecies was that

God would send a Messiah who would turn the hearts of the people back to God in heartfelt repentance.

“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” (2Ch 7:14)

Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days. (Hosea 3:5)

The astonishing thing was that not only did Jesus call for repentance he also announced forgiveness -something only a priest could do, and that only in the temple in God’s presence. Jesus made Himself that presence by declaring forgiveness. It is important for us to note that although Jesus did not explain the atonement, He did announce forgiveness.

Anticipating the Kingdom

Jesus’ announcement of the Kingdom had been anticipated by numerous notable events recorded by Matthew and Luke:

- The angelic visit to Zachariah:

“Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John ... Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” (Lk 1:16-17)

- The angelic visit to Mary:

“You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end.” (Lk 1:31-32)

- Zechariah’s prophecy at John’s birth:

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets

of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us— to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” (Lk 1:67-75 NIV)

- The angelic visit to the shepherds:

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.” (Lk 2:10-11)

- Simeon’s prophecy about Jesus:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” (Lk 2:29-32)

- The testimony of the Magi:

“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” (Matt 2:2)

- John the Baptist’s preaching:

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” (Matt 3:1)

“John said to the crowds coming out to be baptised by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” “What should we do then?” the crowd asked. (Lk 3:7-10)

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. (Lk 3:15)

“I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.” (Jn 1:34)

Announcing the Good News

Jesus started his ministry by preaching in the synagogues:

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. (Lk 4:14-15)

Luke provides us with an example of this early ministry, where Jesus reads a prophecy of the coming Kingdom and announces that this prophecy is now fulfilled:

On the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom, and he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Lk 4:16-21 NIV)

The new age Jesus preached consisted of victory over Satan as demonstrated by healing and deliverance, and a new relationship with God as demonstrated through the pronouncement of forgiveness and Jesus’ teaching on prayer. Everywhere Jesus preached He also *demonstrated* the presence of the New Kingdom.

In fact Jesus summarised His mission very simply:

“I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.” (Lk 13:32)

When we pray the Lord’s prayer, saying “Your Kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” this is what we are praying for; the present reality of the Kingdom that Jesus preached and demonstrated in healing and deliverance. Without that we can hardly claim to have the Gospel, and without demonstrating it we can hardly claim to be proclaiming the Gospel. Jesus’ Gospel was not primarily about going to heaven when we die, but about bringing Heaven’s rule here and now on earth. The miracles were not to prove who Jesus was but the simple outworking of His Gospel announcement, “The Kingdom of God has come”:

“But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” (Lk 11:20)

Jesus’ ascension was the climax for the disciples seeing the kingdom coming; Jesus’ enthronement to rule the Kingdom He had begun to demonstrate; Jesus now in the heavenly realm from where He would continue to rule on earth, both directly and also through all those who believed in Him.

The Gospel that Jesus preached was the Kingdom of God here and now.

Jesus Himself is the Good News

Jesus very clearly presented Himself as the Good News:

He is the “prophet like Moses”

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. (De 18:15)

He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” (Isa 2: 3)

In accordance with the ancient prophecy Jesus placed Himself above Moses in authority. Six times in Matt 5:21-48 Jesus quoted from Moses and replaced the Law with His own instruction. “Moses said ... but I say ...”

Jesus made claims to knowing the Father beyond anything Moses could claim:

Then Moses said, “Now show me your glory.” And the LORD said, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence... But you cannot see my face, for no-one may see me and live.” (Ex 33:18-20)

Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. (De 34:10)

Jesus is this prophet who has known the Lord face to face; able to speak from having seen God’s face, not just His back.

“No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” (Jn 1:18)

“the Father knows me and I know the Father” (Jn 10:15)

“I and the Father are one.” (Jn 10:30)

“I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.” (Jn 16:28)

“No-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” (Matt 11:27)

He is the anointed one

“I have come from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.” (Jn 6:38)

“I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me.” (Jn 8:42)

“No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.” (Jn 6:44)

“Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.” (Jn 10:10)

He is the Prince of Peace

“Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.” (Mk 5:34)

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.” (Jn 14:27)

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matt 11:28-30)

He is the Eternal King

“All things have been committed to me by my Father.” (Matt 11:27)

“The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands.” (Jn 3:35)

“The Father judges no-one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son” (Jn 5:22)

“You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” (Jn 18:37)

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” (Matt 25:31-32)

Jesus is how we know God

No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jer 31:34)

Jesus presented Himself as the way we can know God.

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well.” (Jn 14:6-7)

“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” (Jn 14:9)

“All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.” (Jn 16:15)

Jesus is the victor over our enemy

The very first act of Jesus’ mission was to confront Satan in the wilderness. All the synoptic gospels record the Holy Spirit leading Jesus to face the temptations:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. (Lk 4:1-2)

His mission was to invade Satan’s territory and set people free. First He needed to overcome Satan and bind him:

“But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. How can anyone enter a strong man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house.” (Matt 12:28-29)

He did this by His obedience.

Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him. (Matt 4:10-11)

Jesus’ obedience to His Father gave Him full authority and power over Satan and his demons:

“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.” (Lk 10:18-19)

“Should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” (Lk 13:16)

“Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.” (Jn 12:31)

Jesus can forgive us our sins

“But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...” He said to the paralysed man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” (Lk 5:24)

“For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.” (Jn 5:21)

A Summary of the Gospel

Our brief exploration of the Gospel Jesus preached has taken us five pages! If we are to be able to share the gospel Jesus preached without referring to a book we need to summarise it in a few words. When we look for such a summary in the Gospels we find that Jesus provided many different summaries, each tailored for a different need (look for example at Matthew 13). We need to learn from Jesus and offer short relevant summaries according to the need of the person we are talking to.

The New Testament nearly always describes the Gospel as the “Gospel of the Kingdom”. Any Gospel summary we present should also be about the Kingdom of God, and not just about individual forgiveness.

There are at least 17 descriptions of the Gospel in the Acts. Here is the complete list with the sermons in bold:

Acts 2:10; **Acts 2:17, 21, 23, 36, 38**; Acts 4:29-31; Acts 5:41; **Acts 7**; Acts 8:5-7, 12; **Acts 10:36-38, 42-43**; **Acts 13:32, 38-39**; Acts 14:3; **Acts 14:15**, 22; Acts 16:30-31; **Acts 17:7, 16, 18, 30-31**; Acts 18:5; Acts 19:8; Acts 20:21; Acts 26:17-18; Acts 28:8-9; Acts 28:23, 31.

Of these, at least 11 emphasise Jesus as Messiah or King. Only three descriptions of the Gospel include forgiveness of sins! The others emphasise turning to God in faith.

Here are some of the most illuminating examples:

He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that **he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead**. (Acts 10:42-43)

"They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that **there is another king, one called Jesus**." ... Paul was **preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection**. ... "He commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when **he will judge the world with justice** by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17:7, 16, 18, 30-31)

Acts 13:32, 38-39 "**We tell you the good news**: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, **by raising up Jesus** ... I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. **Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin**, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses."

Acts 14:15 **We are bringing you good news**, telling you to **turn from these worthless things to the living God**, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them"

Acts 26:17-18 "I am sending you to them to open their eyes and **turn them from darkness to light**, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may **receive forgiveness of sins** and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

Acts 10:42-43 and Acts 26:17-18 are especially illuminating as they both tell us directly what Jesus told the disciples to preach.

On the six occasions where we get more detail the gospel is presented as a story of God acting in His world to reveal Himself to mankind. In each case Jesus' resurrection is the climax of the story. Jesus is the King of God's Kingdom and the rightful judge of all mankind. His desire and invitation is for us to believe and come into His Kingdom.

For our gospel preaching to be authentic, it must focus on the Kingdom of God and not on personal sin.

Presenting The Gospel as Jesus did

The Gospel is Good News

The point we must remember is that the Gospel is, by definition, Good News! (At least it is to those who respond in trusting obedience to Jesus.) Good news, again by definition, is something that makes people cheerful and gives them hope. That in turn means it must connect with a need or concern that makes sense to the person. That is why Jesus tailored His message to the needs and concerns of the person he was addressing. We should do the same.

The "standard" four-part gospel message goes something like:

1. God created you for relationship with Him.
2. You are alienated from God because of your sin and destined for eternal hell.
3. Jesus died to pay the penalty for your sin.
4. Only by faith and obedience to Jesus can we be restored to friendship with God.

Can this be described as the Gospel of the Kingdom? I don't think so. It is focused on an individual's sinful acts rather than dealing with the Kingdom of which they are part. The Kingdom and Jesus' resurrection are not key features and may not be mentioned at all.

Another problem with this way of presenting the Gospel is that most people don't readily relate to it as good news; it doesn't scratch where they itch. You therefore have to first work hard at getting a person to "see" that they have a problem in their relationship with God that really matters. Only then does this gospel sound like good news. You might be able to get them to pray a prayer asking for forgiveness but probably by the next day they will have forgotten

all about it. The simple fact is that more than 90% of people who “respond” to this version of the gospel do not go on to become disciples of Jesus.

And yet in three short years, without first explaining the atonement, Jesus raised up more than 500 disciples to whom he appeared after His resurrection (1Cor 15:6). It seems likely that on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection Jesus gave a full explanation of His death as atonement:

“Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Lk 24:26-27)

Here, I think we have a significant point. An explanation of the Gospel in terms of our sin separating us from God is probably not generally the best approach. That can come later when a person has already met Jesus and they are curious to understand the scriptures. Let us learn from Jesus.

Jesus did not have any difficulty drawing a crowd because He spoke about things that mattered to His hearers. But more than that, He healed and delivered them and even fed them! But there is one thing Jesus never did...

No Appeal

There is not a single record of Jesus following His teaching with an appeal for people to become disciples. No one is invited to pray a sinner’s prayer. In fact when we examine Jesus’ approach to “soul-winning” it is rather shocking.

Take for example His preaching in Nazareth which Luke tells us about in some detail. Jesus had already gained a reputation in Capernaum and the people gathered in the synagogue are eager to hear Him for themselves:

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom ... All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked. (Lk 4:14-22)

Jesus is full of the power of the Spirit; He has their rapt attention; they are hanging on His every word. All Jesus needs to do is to urge them to turn their hearts to God, confess their sin and ask for forgiveness. Jesus Himself can forgive them there and then. What a harvest to celebrate at the start of His ministry!

But no. With no provocation from the congregation Jesus first accuses them of scepticism and then provokes them to fury with a pointed telling of a couple of stories from the scripture. As a result He is thrown out and their hearts are turned against Him.

Any evangelist that behaves like this deserves to be thrown out and can be sure they will not get a repeat invitation! But isn't Jesus supposed to be our model? John the Baptist did the same, baiting the Pharisees saying "who warned you to flee the wrath to come? "

Both Jesus and John were more likely to provoke an adverse reaction from their congregation than make an emotional appeal to them.

Jesus says "Go home" not "Come follow me"

Although this example from Nazareth is more dramatic than the other examples recorded for us, it is nevertheless fairly typical. We assume that if someone actually came to us asking for healing, deliverance or to obtain peace with God, we should urge them follow Jesus. But Jesus never seemed to do so. Usually, after Jesus has engaged with someone in healing, or forgiveness, He tells them to go on their way.

Jesus asked her, "Has no-one condemned you?" "No-one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." (Jn 8:10-11)

"Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." (Mk 10:52)

Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." (Lk 7:50)

We do know that Jesus called the Twelve to follow Him, but apart from them we are more likely to see Jesus putting people off from following Him:

"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me." (Matt 10:37-38)

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Still another said, "I will follow

you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.” Jesus replied, “No-one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” (Lk 9:57-62)

A man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ... Jesus answered ... “You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your father and mother.’” “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Mk 10:17-21)

Jesus seemed to simply trust the Holy Spirit to take the words He had sown through His teaching and to water them until a person decided they had to seek Jesus out and become a disciple. Jesus did all He could to prevent people making spur-of-the-moment emotional responses to the Gospel. If a person did not seek Jesus out and make an effort to become a disciple, they would not become a disciple at all.

Change your ways

Are we to conclude then that Jesus preached a wishy-washy feel-good Gospel and didn’t bother with sin and repentance? Not at all. Jesus was quite clear that He came to save sinners, and that repentance was required:

“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” (Lk 5:32)

Jesus even sought out people He had previously healed to warn them to turn from sin:

Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” (Jn 5:14)

“Those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” (Lk 13:4-5)

We know that Jesus’ Gospel was not a wishy-washy “God loves you all. Just smile at the cat and you will get to heaven”. Far from it. Jesus’s Gospel was so challenging that it led his disciples to ask:

"Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" And He said to them, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able." (Lk 13:23-24)

The Proper Response to the Gospel

John baptised those who repented as did Jesus' disciples:

The Pharisees heard that Jesus was gaining and baptising more disciples than John although in fact it was not Jesus who baptised, but his disciples. (Jn 4:1-2)

Both the Gospels and Acts tell us that baptism is the appropriate response to the message, not praying some prayer. If a person will not follow up their response to the Gospel with baptism then what is the response worth?

Purpose, not Method

The hundreds of disciples that followed Jesus before his death knew nothing about Jesus dying to save them from their sins. They simply believed that Jesus was sent by God to usher in the new age of the kingdom of God and were baptised on that basis.

The underlying mechanism of this new age was not something that Jesus mentioned until the Last Supper. It required Paul in applying his great biblical knowledge and remarkable intellect along with spiritual revelation to bring an explanation of how the good news of the kingdom was brought about by the death and resurrection of the Messiah.

We seem to have become fixated on this explanation of the means of our salvation rather than following the focus that Jesus and the rest of the New Testament gives to the Gospel. That focus is on the relationship we can have with God.

It's as if we were fixated on the engine under the bonnet of a car, rather than on the car itself. The whole point of a car is to get you from A to B. Of course it is perfectly true that without a reliable engine it won't get you there, but the engine is not the focus. In fact, you don't have to know anything about the engine, nor do you ever have to see it to benefit from its power. The Cross is the essential power of the gospel, but not its point. When we focus on the cross instead of on our relationship with God, we focus on something that Jesus did not.

Discipleship is all about relationship with God and a driving desire to develop that relationship. There is no way a person is going to go on with God unless that relationship is an all-important desire. No amount of teaching about heaven and hell will cause a person to deny themselves and follow Jesus. If it is not enough to make a Christian share the Gospel with their friends how could it convince an unbeliever to refocus their entire life around obedience to Jesus?

Conclusion

My conclusion from this study is that evangelism should consist mostly of demonstrations of the Kingdom through healing, deliverance and prayers of blessings for people. We should tell people that Jesus came to deliver us from the power of Satan who seeks to destroy our lives and tell them that they can have a personal relationship with God. We should also tell them something of the cost and difficulties of discipleship. If they are interested we can tell them more or invite them to join a Growth Group.

Remember that if people do not ask, “How then can anyone be saved” or “Are only a few saved?” then we are not preaching as Jesus did! (See Lk 14:26-33 ... unless you ... you cannot be my disciple)

We should follow the teaching of the New Testament in offering baptism as the way a person expresses their commitment to Christ, and NOT use the sinner’s prayer until the moment of baptism.

In our evangelistic meetings, having explained about the New Kingdom, we should try to put people off rather than try to persuade them to follow Jesus. We should tell them how they are blinded by Satan and how half-hearted followers make Jesus sick (this should help to put off the proud and arrogant).

We should warn them that following Jesus in a selfish and corrupt world is a big challenge that most Christians find difficult. Jesus Himself died on the cross and most of the apostles also died horrible deaths as martyrs. Christians in every age have suffered terrible persecution and shared the common fate of man in the trials and troubles of this world.

We also need to be truthful and honest about the realities of our relationship with Jesus. It is not an easy relationship to develop; it takes discipline, determination and courage. We also need to be clear about the joys of that relationship.

We should not ask people to respond to the gospel by praying a prayer of commitment. By all means offer a prayer asking God to convict them of their sin and of their need for Him (that is something Jesus said the Holy Spirit would do).

We should offer baptism soon after the evangelistic meeting (perhaps the next day or the following week) as a means for people who continue to want to follow Jesus to respond and receive the Holy Spirit. Prior to baptism we should again attempt to put the person off and ensure they understand that coming to Jesus means renouncing all other spirits, ancestor worship, secret societies, attempts to contact the dead, African signs and superstition. Jesus represents the Kingdom of Light where nothing in our lives or hearts is hidden from Him.