

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
GOSPEL

WHAT JESUS PREACHED—
WE MUST FOLLOW

Bill Hull & Ben Sobels

The Discipleship Gospel

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INTRODUCTION

“As egg-headed as it may sound, our basic problem is our theology. The problem is our doctrine of salvation.”

—DALLAS WILLARD

Why must we define the gospel today? Let's start with a common scene that takes place in the counseling chambers of hundreds of pastors every day. Someone comes to the leader's office and says, “I'm divorcing my mate. I've fallen in love with someone else, and I'm no longer happy. I need to do this.”

The pastor protests, “You can't do that—it's wrong! You don't have a good, biblical reason to divorce. If you follow through, you're committing adultery, and whomever you marry will become an adulterer as well.”

The person looks at the pastor, almost whimsically, and says, “Of course I can. You've been teaching for years that God will forgive all my sins—that was handled on the cross. All my sins—past, present, and future—are forgiven. I'm going to heaven when I die anyway, so no one can snatch me out of the Father's hand. I am secure in Christ because it's all about grace.”

At this juncture, it's “game, set, match” for many church leaders. We've found ourselves in this situation, just as you may have in one way or another.

At this point, we don't have much to say because the person is merely repeating to us what we have taught them. They are misconstruing our teaching, of course, but the damage has already been done. We could try to protest and say, "No, God won't forgive you (at least anytime soon)! That is, unless you repent of your sin, which includes turning away from this new relationship."

But that doesn't work.

Another option is that we could give a convincing presentation about, "reaping what you sow," or about how God's discipline will bear upon them one day, and they will have a long, hard life if they continue on this path. Chances are, though, they will ignore our advice, divorce their spouse, and marry the new person. In a few years though, they'll be serving, teaching, and leading people at another congregation like nothing happened.

You know what happens next, don't you? They ask God to forgive them for the wrong they've done, glorying in the fact that, "God worked all things together for the good." They rejoice in how much happier everyone is—both them and their ex-spouse—and how the children are "just fine."

In my (Bill's) many years of pastoral experience, this scenario is all too common.

That kind of rationalization is possible though because the primary gospel preached in America today, by default, is the "forgiveness-only gospel," which is almost exclusively focused on sin and atonement.¹ The forgiveness-only gospel is connected to the idea of saying a magic prayer that gets you into heaven one day. It's a sort of transaction between the one praying and God, where the person gets a salvation ticket. Behavior in this "gospel" is in no way connected to this initial transaction. As long as your barcode is correct—*beep*—you're allowed into heaven.

This kind of teaching leads people to think they believe the gospel because that's what they've been taught. Over time, the truth is revealed that they did not believe at all; they had simply agreed with a religious proposition. It's an innocent error though because emphasizing forgiveness is *part of the full gospel*. The problem is that they don't really *believe* Christ; they only *profess faith in* Christ. It is a grave error to equate profession of faith with belief. That's why it's important to set the record straight, rebuild our understanding of the gospel, and crack the code of the gospel that Jesus preached—what we're calling the "discipleship gospel."

Our purpose in this project is twofold. First, we introduce the problem with preaching non-discipleship gospels that don't call people to be disciples. As such, these false gospels don't lead people to make disciples. Second, we show that the New Testament gospel writers made very clear to their

audience seven essential elements of the gospel Jesus preached. Jesus' gospel led his disciples to make disciples. Please keep in mind that the seven elements do not comprise a definition of the gospel. They do, however, provide the critical framework for defining the gospel, which we explore in this book, too. We must be sure to preach Jesus' gospel, which is a gospel of discipleship. The longer we preach non-discipleship gospels, the more we delay the fulfillment of Christ's great commission.

As you read this book, we offer you a clear definition of Jesus' discipleship gospel. This definition of the gospel, we believe, will help you and those in your church gain crystal clarity on the nature of the gospel so that you can be fully equipped to answer in our day the question, "What is the gospel?"

Toward the end, we'll discuss how Jesus' discipleship gospel can incite a discipleship revolution in your life and create a disciple-making movement in your church and in your world.

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