

MOVED AND SHAPED BY THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM  
(A sermon to the Philadelphia Presbytery, September 13, 2006)

by Stephen Smallman

I invite you to turn to Luke ch. 4 and follow as I read two portions. I read first, Luke 4:14-21:

*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. 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, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

*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."*

Now turn to the end of the chapter and I will read verses 40-44:

*When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them. Moreover, demons came out of many people, shouting, "You are the Son of God!" But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew he was the Christ.*

*At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent."*

I will come back to these passages in a few minutes. As most of you know, we are using this worship time to preach through the twelve core values of our presbytery. Last Spring Ed Gross did a wonderful job of expounding on the first value: "*Our passion is to see the glory of God displayed throughout the whole earth.*" This evening it is my privilege to speak about the second core value, "*The gospel of the kingdom moves and shapes the church.*" Let me read to you the first explanatory paragraph under this core value:

*The Gospel is the long-awaited announcement that God fulfilled his promise to bring salvation to a broken world—the kingdom of God. John the Baptist announced this good news and then pointed to Jesus as the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus came as the King of the Kingdom and through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension we find new life for ourselves and hope for a needy world. Personally, we enter the kingdom by the new birth as the Spirit enables us to repent and believe the gospel. Then we are brought together as a community that Jesus called "my church." Now, as Jesus' Church, we seek to be transformed by the gospel, and to see the gospel transform our world. We preach the gospel to ourselves, to the church and to the world. When the Gospel is at work in us, it gives us new freedom, new power, and new relationships. The Gospel changes everything.*

Let me explain how I want us to think about this core value. First of all we need to consider, “What is the gospel?” I think these days the word *gospel* can be used virtually as a mantra—a feel-good word that we use without much definition. So we have been careful to define the gospel, and identify it as “the gospel of the kingdom.” What does that mean?

The second thing I want us to consider is how it is that we, the church, are moved and shaped by this gospel of the kingdom.

#### WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

Think first with me about this most basic of questions that we in the Church need to understand. *What is the Gospel?* That is not as easy a question as it might first appear. As I reflect on my years in ministry I think I would have answered the question in three different ways. (I could call this the *evolution* of my understanding of the gospel, but I know that is a dirty word.)

Years ago, if you had asked me to define the gospel, I would have said it is an explanation of how one can be saved. *Presenting the gospel* meant walking people through basic truths like those found in the Four Spiritual laws, or the Evangelism Explosion outline; to preach a *gospel* sermon meant that we were talking to unbelievers about receiving Christ as Lord and Savior. So there was the gospel and then there were all the blessings and obligations that belong to the Christian.

Now, is it gospel to explain how to come to faith in Christ? Of course it is—but the gospel is for the believer as well, and that is the second step in my understanding. For years in ministry I loved to teach about grace, or what we call “the doctrines of grace.” But I confess, I didn’t think of that as gospel. Well, thankfully I came to realize that biblically the gospel includes *all* the riches we have in Christ. In Colossians 1 Paul speaks of the gospel as “God’s grace in all its truth.” So when we talk about the gospel as “the power of God for the salvation of those who believe,” that is not just speaking of conversion or justification, but the whole of God’s gift of salvation. In fact, Romans 1:16 uses the word *believe* in the present and progressive sense—we *continue* to believe the gospel and experience its power.

The man that God used to turn the spotlight on this larger meaning of the gospel for many of us was Jack Miller. I think when I heard Jack speak about the gospel in this broader sense I was puzzled at first, but then I said “of course! This is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel of grace—believers need to hear it as much as unbelievers” Just the other day I was listening again to Jack’s first *Sonship* lecture about “orphans vs. sons” and I was reminded of how freeing it is to live out of this greater dimension of the gospel. One of the great challenges we have as preachers is to learn what it means to preach the gospel to the church.

And so in a unique way, a very important part of our heritage as the Philadelphia Presbytery is this understanding of the gospel. Tonight we are meeting in one of the New Life churches; these are churches that were spawned by the renewal movement that came from understanding the gospel as good news for believers as well as unbelievers.

But the gospel is more than about God’s grace for our personal salvation, as wonderful as that is. As we say in the core value, the gospel is the announcement that God has fulfilled his promise to deliver this world from its bondage to sin. After centuries of waiting he finally returned to bring shalom, peace, to the earth. And this is the third

step in my understanding of the gospel—the gospel as the proclamation that in Christ the kingdom has come.

That was the message of the angels on Christmas Eve: “Fear not, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people, . . .” (the verb here is *euangelizo*—our word *evangelize*). So the angels were evangelizing the shepherds by announcing the good news that “in the city of David a Savior had been born, who is the Messiah, the Lord”. And suddenly the angel was joined by a massive choir of angels singing with joy and excitement, “In the heavens—Glory to God!; and on earth—Shalom!” This is the good news, the kingdom has come in the person of this baby—God with us. We can easily miss the centrality of the kingdom in this good news by forgetting that *Christ* is not Jesus’ last name, it is the Greek word for *Messiah*. He is, “Jesus—the One anointed to rule over God’s new creation”. “Joy to the world, the Lord has come, let earth receive her king.”

Look again at the passage in Luke 4. Jesus returned to his hometown at the very beginning of his ministry, having been baptized with water and the Holy Spirit, and having gone through 40 days of testing from Satan. In the synagogue where he grew up he was given the scroll of Isaiah and he unrolled it to what we now know as ch. 61. I’m reading from Luke 4:18: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor [that verb again is *euangelizo*—he is announcing the gospel]; 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 favor.”

Now, Jesus read from Isaiah 61, but Isaiah was quoting Leviticus 25, about the year of Jubilee—when all debts were forgiven, the debtors prisons opened and people given a chance for a new beginning. The Year of Jubilee was a wonderful concept—it is a picture of what the Law could do if only people would obey it. But there is no record in the Old Testament that Israel ever observed the Year of Jubilee. So it shows up in Isaiah as a prophecy of what God would do when he delivered the earth from the curse—“the year of the Lord’s favor.” And all the people listening to Jesus knew that this was one of the great prophecies of the coming to earth of the kingdom of God—and so we read, “and the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.” [Long Pause]

I notice more and more of you looking at me, wondering why I am not saying something. I visualize this as what was happening at the synagogue after Jesus read this familiar passage—people waited, staring at Jesus, wondering what he would say. And what *did* he say? “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” “I am that anointed one, here to announce the good news that the day of God’s deliverance has come.” Do you understand this as one of the most extraordinary moments in the ministry of Jesus? He was announcing to his home crowd that He personally was the embodiment of the kingdom of God. And they were stunned, and we should be too.

Later in the chapter Jesus demonstrates this truth by acts of compassion and healing the sick, and he makes it clear that God’s kingdom is more powerful than the kingdom of evil by casting out demons. The people wanted him to stay, but notice what Jesus said in v. 43: “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God [that verb *euangelizo* again] to the other towns also, *because that is why I was sent.*” Jesus’ mission in coming to earth was to announce and establish the kingdom of God. We hear people say over and over that Jesus came to die for our sins—true, of course, but death on the cross was not his mission, it was necessary to fulfill his mission. He went to the cross

and defeated death and Satan to open the way for the mercies of God to flow to all the nations.

Let me encourage you to take some time to study this question for yourself in the Scripture. I don't think what I have said about the kingdom is new to most of you—we know about the centrality of the kingdom to Jesus' teaching, and about the “already and not yet” of the kingdom that we are living in today. But what may sound new is the idea that the kingdom should be essential to our understanding of the *gospel*. In other words, this is not *Theology 401*--theology that defines our understanding of the covenant or our eschatology, but *Theology 101*. This is foundational; Jesus taught his new disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. This should go to the very core of our preaching and the way we do ministry. The kingdom of God is a hot topic now if you read the literature of the Emergent Church or the teachers about the missional church, or new perspectives on Paul, so it's important to be cautious—as we should be. But the question of course is, whoever happens to be writing about it, *is this biblical?* We are saying it is.

## HOW DOES THE GOSEPL OF THE KINGDOM MOVE AND SHAPE THE CHURCH?

Now consider the second part of the core value: “The gospel of the kingdom moves and shapes the Church.” How does that happen? I have three thoughts about this, and I'm sure there could be others.

### **1. In the first place, when the church is moved and shaped by the gospel of the kingdom, it aligns us with Jesus' agenda.**

Jesus stated clearly in Luke 4 that the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom of God was why he was sent. Pair that text with John 20:21. The first words of the risen Christ to his assembled disciples were, “As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” Consider Acts 1:1. “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach.” Have you noticed that little word *began* in the first verse of Acts? Even though Luke's gospel tells the full story of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and even ascension, he considered that the *beginning* of Jesus' ministry—a ministry, by the way defined by doing and teaching—what we now call deed and word ministries.

Acts tells the story of Jesus' *church* moving out by the power of the Spirit to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the world of the Gentiles, to make disciples of the nations. But Luke wants us to understand that as *Jesus* continuing “to do and to teach”. Jesus' mission is now our mission--the proclamation and demonstration of the kingdom of God.

This means if we want our churches to know the presence of Jesus and power of the Spirit we need to be carrying out his mission because that is what Jesus is doing. How much of what we do in our churches is really our agenda that we want Jesus to bless? But Jesus is now building His Church to move against the very gates of hell. His statement in Matthew 16 is not about the church being able to survive—gates don't attack, they try to hold out the invaders, and Jesus said the gates of hell will not keep out his church. Jesus has been doing this for 2000 years now, and while it is very easy to be discouraged in the

short-term, the big picture is that from a tiny group of twelve, Jesus' church has grown to include millions and millions of people of every tribe and nation. And he's not finished yet—the kingdom is coming and will prevail. Amen??

This should be not something we only talk about once a year at our missions conferences, but it is at the core of the gospel we preach—the victory of Jesus over the powers of death and hell. Most of us despair about getting people to move away from self-preoccupation and even a self-absorbed view of Christ. We tell people, “it's not about us!” But if you listen carefully to the gospel we preach over and over—it *is* about us! That's why Jesus came after all—to die for our sin so we can go to heaven when we die. Of course, we say, there are many other things to consider, but the gospel tells us what is most important.

I don't think it is the total answer to this problem, but if we learn to proclaim and live out the gospel of the kingdom it will be a major step in moving believers away from a preoccupation with themselves. Because built in to the gospel of the kingdom is a sense of Jesus' mission to the needy world.

## **2. Secondly, the gospel of the kingdom moves and shapes the church because it is the source of true renewal.**

A generation ago, Dr. Richard Lovelace coined the phrase, “ongoing renewal through the depth presentation of the gospel.” He introduced that phrase in a book that is still in print, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*. I know many of you have read the book. But several years later Dr. Lovelace wrote a second book called, *Renewal As a Way of Life*, (which unfortunately is out of print). The book was a shorter and more popular presentation of the ideas in *Dynamics*, but he added a chapter on the kingdom, which then permeated his teaching about renewal. The aim of the book, and here I quote, “is to rebuild Christian spirituality on a stronger foundation: a theology which blends Reformation themes with the biblical teaching on the kingdom of Christ.”

I think that is a great statement. It is not a question of the kingdom *or* the doctrines of grace. It is renewal by discovering the *fullness* we have in Christ in order to *fulfill* the mission of Christ. Do you see that balance? And it's a dynamic balance. Renewal without that sense of mission becomes very inward looking; and mission without living out of our riches in Christ becomes very man-centered and results driven, and we soon run out of gas. The church of Jesus is energized by moving *in* to Christ, who then sends us *out* in the power of the Holy Spirit. That's true renewal.

This is a huge topic, so all I can do is point the way. But “renewal through the depth presentation of the gospel” can be and needs to be a reality in our churches, but it needs to be the gospel of the kingdom of God that is the instrument of a godly renewal that will impact the world. In my last ten years as pastor of the church in McLean, Virginia, we worked very hard to develop a philosophy of ministry and an approach to discipleship that was oriented around the gospel of the kingdom, and I can tell you that it really does make a difference.

## **3. Thirdly, the gospel of the kingdom moves and shapes the church because it calls us to bring everything in life under the Lordship of Christ our King.**

The remembrances of 9/11 this week have made me realize that this “war against terrorism” we are in is ultimately a war about different worldviews. And Western

Secularism is bankrupt and unable to say anything meaningful to the Muslim vision of the world and life. The gospel of the Kingdom of God, on the other hand, is good news for our whole world—far better than any Islamic vision of the future. Do we know how to proclaim this greater picture of the good news of God’s Shalom for a broken world?

The gospel really is good news—as we say in explanation of the core value, “the gospel changes everything”. Let me close by reading the second paragraph in the explanation of the core value.

*The Gospel changes everything. What a rich and enriching thought: in Christ, the most menial task and the most common man is holy in God’s sight and useful in His service. God works powerfully in and through the believer’s daily life, whether in the marketplace, the assembly line, or the sanctuary; whether over a meal, a Bible study, or a back-yard conversation. “So whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (I Cor. 10:31). “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men ... it is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Col. 4:23, 24). This changes everything. Life is not cut into compartments, some for Jesus and His service, some not. Every man and woman saved by His grace is a man of God or a woman of God and is in His service every day in every way. So every arena of life is touched by God and can be transformed by the Gospel. He has sovereign claim and influence upon all of life.*

Stephen Smallman  
[steve@birthlineministries.com](mailto:steve@birthlineministries.com)  
[www. Birthlineministries.com](http://www.Birthlineministries.com)