

“Can You Be a Christian Without Being a Disciple?”

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Dallas Willard shares a story from a pastor who challenged his congregation to become disciples. In response to this challenge, a woman said to her pastor after worship, “I just want to be a Christian. I don’t want to be a disciple. I like my life the way it is. I believe that Jesus died for my sins, and I will be with him when I die. Why do I have to be a disciple?” How did we end up with this unfortunate yet quite common distinction that you can be a Christian without being a disciple?

Presently, the good news is largely framed in terms of receiving the benefits that Christ has purchased on the cross. This popular gospel is what I have come to call the *transactional gospel*. I call it a transaction because we see the message of salvation in accounting terms: our sin is entered as an eternal debit on our account; Jesus’ death on the cross is our full payment for our sin; by faith his credit is transferred to our account, which cancels our debt and we are handed a receipt stamped “Paid in Full.” Forgiveness of our sin debt and the assurance of eternal life is the gospel. Period.

In his book *The King Jesus Gospel* Scot McKnight argues that we have come to equate the gospel with “the plan of salvation” that is usually summarized in four points:

- God loves you
- You messed up
- Jesus died for you
- Accept Jesus into your heart

The deal is sealed with the decision to receive Jesus Christ and trust him alone for forgiveness of sins and eternal life, followed by what we commonly call the sinner’s prayer.

Right now, many of you may be saying to yourself, “So? What’s your point? Isn’t this the gospel?” In fact, this message has been so often repeated as the gospel that any challenge to it may seem like heresy.

If this isn’t an accurate summary of the gospel, then we might ask, what was the gospel that Jesus proclaimed that led to people actually becoming disciples?

Jesus’ Gospel

The book of Mark gives us the most succinct summary of Jesus’ message: “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’” (Mark 1:14-15).

Interestingly enough, Jesus proclamation of good news also had four points:

- The time has come
- The Kingdom of God has come near
- Repent
- Believe the good news

Each phrase is packed with substance, so let's take a closer look.

The time has come. In his paraphrase ***The Message***, Eugene Peterson captures Mark 1:15 simply as "Time's up!" This phrase conjures up the image of a pregnant woman who is closing in on the end of the nine-month waiting period. The culmination commences with birth pangs. Finally, they are five minutes apart. She announces to her husband, "It's time! Call the doctor! Let's go." The hour has arrived; the waiting is over.

So when Jesus says, "The time has come," he ties the gospel story back to the entire story of Israel and views himself as its completion. The Greek word Jesus chooses for time is *Kairos* as opposed to *chronos*. When we say, "What time is it?" we are using *chronos*. This is tick-tock time. One moment is the same as the next. In contrast *Kairos* is opportunity time, a defining moment whose importance is not to be missed. *Kairos* says that everything will be different from this day forward.

The Kingdom of God has come near. Jesus comes on the scene announcing the theme of his ministry as the proclamation of the "kingdom of God" and spends his last moments on earth following his death and resurrection speaking "about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). In between there are 122 references to the kingdom of God or heaven with over ninety of these on the lips of Jesus. In order to understand Jesus' message of good news, we need to understand what he referred to as "the Kingdom of God."

When Jesus came announcing the near presence of the Kingdom of God, this would have stirred up images popular in Jesus' day. The Jewish people had longed for their promised Deliverer or Messiah (Christos) who would usher in the Kingdom of God. One of the things that marked the difference between the Chosen People and all others was their view of history. The Jewish people actually believed history was going somewhere; it had a destination, as opposed to the meaningless repetitious cycles (summer, fall, winter, spring, endlessly; birth, life, death, and rebirth, endlessly) of pagan cultures. The people of Israel believed in a Sovereign God who divide time into two major eras: this age followed by the age to come. (1) This age was torn asunder by sin and all its consequences, one of which was a shameful dominance by a foreign oppressor (at that time Rome). (2) But all of this would be supplanted by the in-breaking of the age to come (the Kingdom of God).

A Messiah King would appear dramatically and establish a glorious age of the eternal reign of God on earth. All sin would be forgiven and expunged. The lion would lie down with the lamb. Swords would be beaten into plowshares. Best of all, the enemies of Israel would be vanquished, and the glory days of King David would be restored forever.

When Jesus came proclaiming, "The Kingdom of God is at hand," you can imagine the surge of hope that pulsed through the veins of the people. Jesus the King was bringing the Kingdom.

But Jesus was bringing in a very different king of Kingdom than was anticipated. From the beginning Jesus set about to indicate that their popular conception of a military leader was not what Jesus was going to be. Even by saying "the Kingdom of God is at hand" was a way to be deliciously ambiguous about the nature of this Kingdom. "At hand" can simultaneously mean "has arrived or is near" and "has come or is still to come." Which is it?

Both.

We live at a time between the times. This is why theologians have spoken of the Kingdom of God as the “already but not yet.” Jesus brings with him a Kingdom that is very different than the one anticipated. How strangely this King wields his power. The Kingdoms of men have symbols of power such as palaces and armies, yet King Jesus has nowhere to lay his head. Human kings rule over their realm on thrones, while King Jesus is lifted up on a cross.

In other words, the Kingdom of God that Jesus brings on earth is a secret government that transcends geographic and political boundaries. It is truly a Kingdom without borders. The interior structure of life in this Kingdom is one dominated by the rule of grace and love. Our King calls us out of the world dominated by strife, tribalism and self-exaltation. Those who follow Jesus must change Kingdoms. The apostle Paul wrote that the Father “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the Kingdom of the Son he loves” (Colossians 1:13). It is only then that we step into the realm where we experience the benefits of the Kingdom. However, to partake of the benefits you must realign your loyalties.

Repent. What is the entry way into the Kingdom of God? Jesus is saying, “Here comes the Kingdom of God, repent and believe the good news.” King Jesus stands in our path and says, “You have a choice to make.”

Repentance is Jesus’ exclamation point, as if Jesus is saying, “Time’s up! Wake up! Quit sleepwalking through life!” Repent is a jarring word and is meant to be so.

Repentance literally means, “Rethink your thinking!” The way you are thinking is leading you in the wrong direction because the kingdom of darkness in which you are currently dwelling has shaped your thinking. But the Kingdom of God is based upon an entirely different set of values. Jesus says, “My kingdom will turn you right side up in an upside-down world.”

To repent then is to begin to lay aside ways of thinking, habits, patterns, goals, ambitions, etc., that are based on a worldly set of assumptions. Jesus’ ministry on earth demonstrated the contours of life in his Kingdom. For example, James and John approached Jesus on the sly with a request to sit on his right and left hand when he came into his Kingdom. What was their notion of the Kingdom that Jesus would establish? It was based upon the view that the Messiah would usher in heaven on earth. Their view of self-importance and personal value meant that they wanted to be as close to the center of power as possible. But Jesus proceeds to flip their view of power on its head: “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you” (Mark 10:42-43). What Jesus was saying to James and John is that they had been captured by the world view of power and value, not his.

If we want to be great in Jesus’ Kingdom, kneeling before others is the appropriate posture. The King never expects of his followers what he has not already modeled, giving “his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

When we enter Jesus’ Kingdom we are called to a new order of life. We begin to recognize through confession of sin that we have been heading entirely in the wrong direction. To repent means to make a U-turn.

Believe the good news. Certainly the good news is that we have wondrous new standing with God through Christ now that we have been made right. Our sin, which separates us from a holy God, has been forgiven, and our forever future is secure. Yet in our simplistic plan of salvation approach we have tended to trivialize the gospel into an easy “believism.”

In the tradition in which he grew up, John Ortberg says that people often asked each other, “Have you trusted Christ?” which was code language for, “Have you prayed the prayer? Do you believe in an arrangement that has been made for you to get you into heaven when you die?” But Jesus means far more than praying a formulaic prayer or assenting to a set of core beliefs, such as a creed. To believe the good news is active. Jesus invites us to live consistent with the good news and enter the Kingdom of God. Put your trust in, lean into and place your weight upon King Jesus.

Conclusion

Can you be a Christian without being a disciple? Or to put it another way, can we just “use” Jesus to get into heaven when we die and not live for him during our earthly days? That whole concept is foreign to the New Testament. For Jesus, Paul or Peter, there was not a sliver of daylight between being a Christian and being a disciple, and there is no middle ground.

Reading Study Guide

1. The woman in the opening story distinguishes between being a Christian and a disciple. What might she say is the difference between the two?
2. Summarize what the author refers to as the “transactional gospel.”
3. What are the differences between the transactional gospel and Jesus’ gospel?
4. How should Jesus’ gospel of the Kingdom of God shape our understanding of what it means to be a disciple? How does Jesus’ gospel lead directly to becoming a disciple, as opposed to simply being a Christian as the woman in Dallas Willard’s story understood it?
5. The means of entry into the Kingdom of God is through repentance. What are you doing when you repent?
6. How has this teaching changed your understanding of the gospel and therefore what it means to be a disciple?