

INSURGENCE

Reclaiming the
GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

FRANK VIOLA



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Introduction

Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Mark 1:14–15 NASB

The book you hold in your hands contains a revolutionary message. One that has shaken nations, toppled kingdoms, altered lives, and set countless people free.

That message radically changed my own life. And it’s still challenging me, stretching me, probing me, transforming me, and (on occasion) scaring me, even as I pen these words.

I’ve been a Christian for over thirty-five years. Throughout that time, I’ve heard countless sermons, read countless books, and traveled the world. Based on my experience and observation, the message I will be presenting in this book is rarely preached today.

I wish I had heard it when I first became a believer. It would have spared me so many problems. Unfortunately, the revolutionary message I will share with you has been replaced by two “lesser” messages. The sober confession of one young man sums up the fruit of one of these:

When I first got saved, I really wanted to please God. So I sat under convicting preaching and read convicting books. I did everything I was told. I worked very hard at trying to serve God and did my best to build His kingdom. But I eventually burned out. And looking back, I didn’t see much impact from my efforts. Later my eyes were opened that my main motivation I was operating

from was guilt and fear. Fear of having God upset with me because I wasn't doing enough for Him. Guilt (which I called "conviction") because I didn't measure up, despite my best efforts.

Another confession from a young woman describes the fruit of the other lesser message:

When I received Jesus, I rejoiced that I was forgiven of all my sins. I was told that my personal life didn't matter much to God because He loves me despite what I do. I'm under grace, and God is primarily interested in justice and helping the poor. For years, my life was focused on raising my children, sending them to college when they grow up, and someday having grandchildren. I went to church once a week, read my Bible, and prayed. I was hungry for justice in the world and supported several causes that promoted it. Looking back, I discovered that Jesus was really just a supplement to my already busy life. Christ wasn't the reason why I breathed. I was living for other things, even good things like raising a family and working for justice, but they weren't my Lord Jesus.

Interestingly, the New Testament takes dead aim at these two lesser messages and the fruit they produce. In fact, most of Paul's letters—which make up the majority of the New Testament—were provoked because the churches he planted embraced one of these two messages.

Sadly, countless Christians today have never been exposed to any other message. Especially the groundbreaking message that we find all throughout the New Testament and that I will seek to unveil in these pages.

This book is divided up into six parts:

- Part I Three Different Gospels
- Part II Unveiling the King's Beauty
- Part III The Gospel of the Kingdom
- Part IV Entering and Enjoying the Kingdom
- Part V Our Glorious Liberty
- Part VI Advancing the Kingdom

Each part builds on the previous one. And they all contain short chapters for ease of reading. Also, some of the questions that will arise in your mind while reading will be answered later in the book.

If I developed every theme in this volume, it would be more than 1,000 pages. Consequently, I've included footnotes and endnotes that contain source material and supplemental resources that delve deeper into the themes. You can obtain these resources at InsurgenceBook.com.

God's Eternal Purpose

For the last two decades, my main focus, burden, and passion has been God's eternal purpose. It is the thread that runs through all my work.

As I have argued in detail elsewhere, the eternal purpose of God is the grand narrative of the entire Bible.¹

The kingdom of God is at the heart of God's eternal purpose. In fact, in recent years, I've come to realize that the kingdom of God is just another term for the eternal purpose. In this respect, John Bright was correct when he wrote,

The concept of the Kingdom of God involves, in a real sense, the total message of the Bible. . . . The Bible is *one* book. Had we to give that book a title, we might with justice call it "The Book of the Coming Kingdom of God." That is, indeed, its central theme.²

The kingdom of God explains and sums up the meaning and purpose of Jesus. The kingdom points to the universal glory, fullness, and rule of Jesus Christ and the exercise of God's image and authority through human beings—the central features of the eternal purpose.

I want to make clear at the outset that I'm not writing this book for scholars or theologians. Yet I believe scholars and theologians will benefit from it.

I'm instead writing so that a teenager in high school who is familiar with the basics of the Bible will be able to understand and gain value from it.

My Hope

My hope in writing this book is that its message will deliver you from every other version of the gospel except the gospel of the kingdom—a gospel that has been virtually lost to us today.

When properly understood and received, I am convinced that the gospel of the kingdom will capture your heart and ruin you for the Lord Jesus Christ and the insurgence He launched on the day of His resurrection.

It's that powerful.

A Warning Before You Read Further

If you dare to read this entire book, you may be infuriated by some of the things I write. And you will probably become defensive over certain parts of it. (So make sure no one is around if you decide to fling the book across the room. Neither I nor the publisher are responsible if you take out an eye! If you're reading the book on your Kindle or Nook, it may be even more dangerous, given that those devices weigh more than a paperback.)

All humor aside, this book is not your typical “Christian” work. Some of the statements I make are admittedly extreme. But they are no less extreme than those made by Jesus and Paul.

Given the explosive content of the book, I interrupt some of the chapters with heartfelt prayers. I encourage you to read those prayers and not skip over them.

So yes, you may get agitated while reading. But holster your weapons and consider whether or not your anger is directed at what I've said or what Jesus or Paul said.

To be candid, I'm writing to strike at your heart. Consequently, if you have a spiritual pulse, I believe you'll be deeply challenged and stirred. And you'll take action.

Being forewarned is being forearmed. And my warning is simple. *You will be distracted from finishing this book.* You will also be distracted from taking action on it.

What follows is my strong encouragement before you turn to the next chapter:

1. Decide right now that you're going to act on the message. The goal of reading this book isn't just to persuade you to change. It's to navigate you through *what* to change.

For this reason, I've added a "Taking Action" section following each part of the book. This section contains steps on how to practically apply the message of the kingdom to your life.

2. If you're going to invest the valuable asset of time to begin this book, make it productive and decide to finish it come hell or high water.

I suggest that you set a clear goal (with a date) as to when you will finish. And create a reading plan where you commit to reading a certain number of chapters each week.

Finishing the book is important, because the threads laid out in previous parts will be pulled out and expanded in later parts. So unless you read every part of the book, you will likely come away with a misunderstanding.

3. If you consider yourself to be a Christian, saved by Christ, I would encourage you to do something you may find strange at first. *Read this book as if you were never saved.* Come to it as a person who is hearing the gospel for the first time.

The truth is that virtually all Christians have heard the gospel of salvation, but not many have heard the gospel of the kingdom. And in the first century, the two weren't separated like they are today. This book seeks to present the full gospel to you for the very first time. So it is to your benefit to prepare your heart and hear it as if it were the first time.

4. In each part of the book, I introduce you to individuals whom I know have obeyed the gospel of the kingdom. Because they are "unsung heroes" in my eyes—ordinary souls, mostly obscure and unknown—I believe their stories will inspire you with confidence that you too can live out the message of this book.

In that regard, I love these words attributed to Dr. Joseph R. Sizoo:

It is what the unimportant do that really counts and determines the course of history. The greatest forces in the universe are never spectacular. Summer showers are more effective than hurricanes, but they get no publicity. The world would soon die but for the fidelity, *loyalty* and consecration of those whose names are unhonored and unsung.¹

5. This book isn't just about you or for you. It's also about and for the people you know. So the single best thing you can do after finishing is to give your copy to someone else. Or better, buy them their own copy. I don't say this because I want to sell books; I have no personal need for that.

But I believe in the message. It changed my life and the lives of those I've shared it with. In fact, to gain the most value from the book, I suggest you read it with a friend or a group.

6. Due to space limitations, we had to move some of the chapters in the original manuscript to InsurgenceBook.com as online articles. Therefore, I encourage you to read each article when you are prompted to in the footnotes.
7. Despite its comprehensive nature, I am not presumptuous enough to think that this book is the final word on the kingdom of God. I regard it as a robust exploration of the subject. I've spoken and written more about the kingdom elsewhere, and so have others whom I mention in the footnotes and endnotes. And many of them are listed on InsurgenceBook.com, a website dedicated to those who wish to delve deeper into the content.

All told, when you finish this volume, you will be equipped to take your place in the divine insurgence that launched 2,000 years ago. An insurgence that will set you free from everything else except Jesus Christ and His glorious kingdom.

• insurgence

noun

An organized opposition intended to change or overthrow existing authority:
insurgency, insurrection, revolt, revolution, sedition, uprising

What Is the Insurgence?

During the last weekend of July 2017, I spoke at a conference in Central Florida. People attended from all over the United States, Australia, New Zealand, China, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, the UK, UAE, and Canada.

The conference was marked by great diversity.

Racial diversity, diversity in age, culture, social status, and so forth. It was a microcosm of God's kingdom.

What took place that weekend was remarkable. A piece of heaven broke through to all of us.

During the conference, I did my dead-level best to unleash the titanic, explosive, cataclysmic, earth-shaking, life-altering gospel of the kingdom that was preached by all the apostles in the first century and that turned the world into a mad rage.

The second night of the conference, something incredible happened. A number of people pulled me aside after the meeting and said things like, "I've not been so shaken by the Lord through a message." Another said, "What took place was electric. Something very special happened in that room that I can't fully describe." Others said they were deeply stirred and rocked by what took place.

We didn't plan this nor foresee it, but the next morning, a number of people expressed their desire to be baptized. So I asked a brother and a sister in Christ to baptize anyone who wanted to respond to the gospel of the kingdom. Those who responded were baptized in the hotel pool where the conference was held.

Each person being baptized gave a moving testimonial about severing their ties with the world system and making their entrance into the glorious

kingdom of God. More than half the conference attendees came out to witness the baptisms and rejoice. (At a public hotel pool!) I was on the tenth floor observing the entire event, and I could hear the clapping and singing from there. The sight brought me to tears.

The next day, I returned home humbled and profoundly thankful. To my mind, the weekend was historical. Many who attended wrote me testimonials of how their lives were turned upside down.

Here is the moving testimony of a woman named Ruth. She wrote it, then read it aloud to everyone just before she was baptized Saturday afternoon.

Thirty-four years ago I responded to a very weak and inaccurate gospel message that I had been taught all of my life. It was a message that was mixed with half truth and half lies. It was a perverted “gospel message” based on works and fueled by fear. I was baptized into that system of control. It’s important for me to be re-baptized today to declare my renunciation with that system and my commitment to the real, true gospel and to our Lord Jesus Christ. So today I do this before you as witnesses, God, and all the heavenly beings, both holy and the demonic beings, because they need to hear my renunciation and proclamation:

By my baptism today, I publicly declare my intentions to completely break ties of loyalty to and come away from this world’s systems and all of its entanglements, distractions, and counterfeits. I choose to forsake all that gets in the way of me fully coming into the kingdom of God—into the Lord Jesus Himself. I repent of being baptized into a legalistic system that taught my acceptance by Him was based on my performance in addition to what Jesus did for me. I renounce any agreement with the fear that this belief produced in me if I didn’t measure up. Although I believed I would go to heaven, I did not know then what it meant to forsake all and to fully enter His kingdom; to “come follow Him.”

I sever my ties to a mixture of lies and half truth, which resulted in a lack of seeing the power of the pure gospel’s effect in my life. I repent of not receiving the fullness of the power of the resurrected Christ in my heart, but instead followed a lie of Him still on the cross. I choose to live by the power of the resurrected Christ and by His grace to appropriate my full inheritance that He paid for, to be a radical laid-down lover of Jesus who will bring this kingdom everywhere I go, to be the royal mature bride that my Beloved deserves and to impact the world with His love.

By His grace, I have counted the cost as best as I know, and I choose to be “all in” toward Him and all out of the world today and forever. I go under the water so that I might die to myself and everything that has tentacles around me, including compromising the gospel. I come up in newness of life, into His glorious light, putting to death all known or unknown agreements to darkness or to living by my flesh or man’s systems. I will be a new creation, a new citizen who is fully immersed in God’s kingdom! I will live by Jesus’ gospel, not any version of man’s invention. Today is a new day, a new start!

~Ruth

What I’ve described above is an example of the insurgence that I will be discussing throughout this book. The insurgence is no less than the recovery of the radical gospel of the kingdom of God—a gospel that I believe will once again shake this earth.

A Prayer for the Insurgence

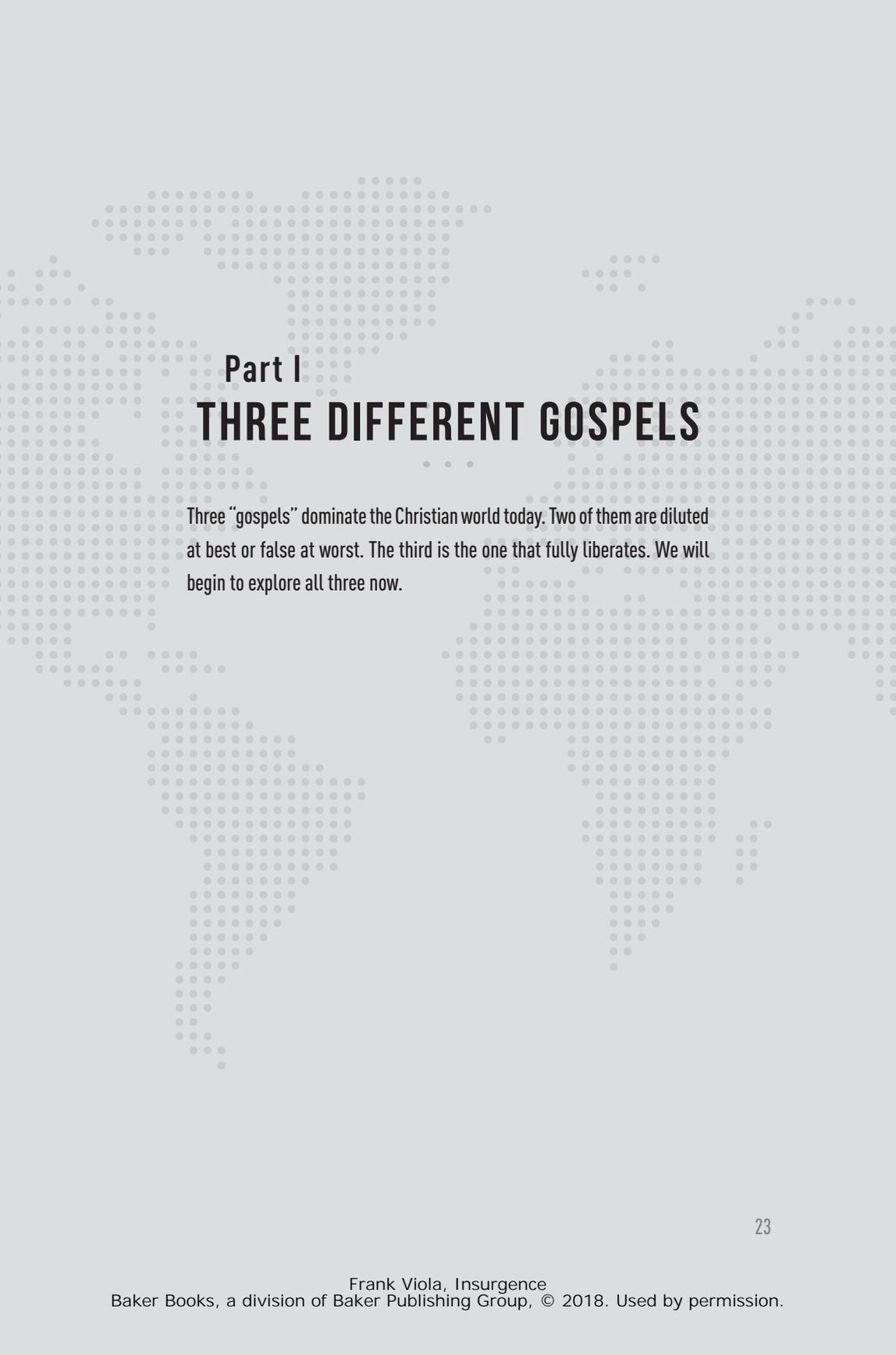
This is the prayer that was in my heart when I began penning this book. Please read it now and agree with me before the Lord:

Lord, I ask that You push back the limits of Your mercy. I confess that the message in this book is beyond me. I’m totally incapable of delivering Your Word within these pages, so I lean hard on You as I craft each sentence.

Give every person who reads this volume a deeper comprehension into Your eternal purpose and everlasting kingdom. Motivate and inspire each one to complete this book and take action on its challenging, yet liberating message. And out of it, gain a people for Yourself who will raise a new standard in the earth of what it means to obey the gospel of the kingdom.

Make them a witness and a testimony of the present—yet ancient—insurgence.

Amen.



Part I

THREE DIFFERENT GOSPELS

Three “gospels” dominate the Christian world today. Two of them are diluted at best or false at worst. The third is the one that fully liberates. We will begin to explore all three now.

The Crisis of Our Times



As I write these words, the Christian faith is in crisis. The impact that the body of Christ has on the world is meager.

The reason for much of this problem has to do with an insipid allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ among Christians and a profound misunderstanding of His kingdom. In fact, I'm convinced that our understanding of "allegiance" to Jesus is warped at best.

By and large, Christians seem to fall into one of two camps when it comes to following Jesus.

Camp 1 consists of those whose relationship to Jesus is understood to be an allegiance to external rule-keeping. These people may not realize it, but they are in bondage to religious duty and obligation.

Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? (Acts 15:10 NIV)

Camp 2 consists of those whose relationship to Jesus is understood to be a supplement to their already busy lives. Believing in Jesus makes them feel a little happier and helps them deal with sad days. But Jesus isn't really central to their lives. These people may not realize it, but they are in bondage to their own desires.

So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. (Revelation 3:16 NIV)

It's rare to find a Christian today who doesn't fit into these two camps. Yet they do exist. And my hope is that with the release of this book, their tribe will increase.

The tribe I'm describing—this third camp—is made up of those whose relationship to Jesus Christ is not motivated by guilt, condemnation, shame, religious duty, the fear of hell, or the hope of heaven. *Rather, it's motivated*

by the compelling sight of the glorious Person of Christ and the irresistible power of His kingdom.

Regrettably, this motivation has been lost to us today.

We are all products of the kind of gospel we hear and believe. So the quality of the convert is the result of the quality of the gospel preached.

Thankfully, the gospel of the kingdom—and all that goes with it—is being recovered and reclaimed among a small group of people all over the world today.

Rising up from the soil, God is raising up a people who are neither rule-oriented nor halfhearted. They are neither self-righteous nor lukewarm. They are neither legalistic nor libertine.

Instead, these are those who are responding to the explosive power of the kingdom message as it was proclaimed in the early days of the primitive church.

This hearty band constitutes an insurgence to the present order of things.

I wrote this book for one reason: so that the insurgence will grow and spread in our time and beyond.

Recovering a High-Octane Gospel

• • •

With rare exception, the gospel that was preached in the first century doesn't exist today. I realize that's a searing statement, but I plan to establish the point throughout this book with the hopes of reclaiming that gospel.

The gospel that John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, Peter, and the rest of the apostles unleashed on the world was so titanic, so overwhelming, so radical, and so utterly uncompromising that it made the strongest of men quake.

The early apostles ripped the earth apart by the seams bare-handed, by the power of the gospel they preached and lived. They were firebrands, rare breeds, unlike anything that most of us have ever encountered. They left all to follow Jesus Christ and live for His kingdom. Their devotion was resolute, total, and utter.

Their gospel overturned the status quo, regardless of the country in which it was proclaimed. It was so revolutionary and subversive that it got those who dared preach it into boiling water.

It got John the Baptist beheaded.* It got Jesus crucified. It got Peter imprisoned. It got Paul killed. It incited riots. It provoked misunderstanding. It caused division, strife, and conflict, even among friends and family. The claims of Jesus Christ regarding His kingdom are so absolutely total that they threaten our closest relationships.†

* Herod Antipas was the ruler of Galilee and was regarded to be “the king of the Jews.” John the Baptist preached the gospel of the kingdom and repentance. John denounced Herod's immoral marriage, which led to his imprisonment and eventually his death (Luke 3:1–20; Matthew 14:1–12). However, I agree with N. T. Wright, who points out that John believed that Herod's immorality demonstrated that he couldn't be the true king of the Jews, and his immorality disqualified him from that position. John believed that his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, was the coming king, not Herod. So in the end, John was beheaded because of the gospel of the kingdom. N. T. Wright, *Simply Jesus* (New York: Harper One, 2011), 80–81.

† See my online article “The Radical Cost of the Kingdom” at InsurgenceBook.com.

This gospel brought persecution, hatred, and disruption wherever it was announced. This is true today, even in countries like the United States of America, where there is freedom of speech.

This gospel was so powerful that Paul of Tarsus could walk into a Gentile city empty-handed, and pagan Gentiles would turn away from their idols and immorality to give their complete allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth as this world's true Lord.

Paul could leave that city after being there for only a few months, abandon it for a year, and return to find those same ex-pagan Gentiles still following Jesus Christ!

Because of the revolutionary message of the gospel, it was a terrifying thing to be a Christian in the first century. You were an insurgent to the present order. A revolutionary. Someone viewed as dangerous.

The gospel of the kingdom is a gospel of spiritual violence. It shakes nations to their foundations and provokes either obedience or rejection. It's so powerful it will upset every generation that hears it, altering the lives of those who submit to its claims.

This is true even in societies like the United States of America where "freedom of speech" is the norm. The gospel of the kingdom, when preached without compromise and in its original purity, sounds treasonous.

Those who obey this gospel stand unmoving on this earth. You can throw anything at them, and it won't shake them from their devotion to the true King, the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel of the kingdom calls the world to account, and the world is forced to reckon with those who proclaim it. Including the world of religion.

Again, the gospel I'm describing hardly exists today. And this is why we are losing masses of young people to Western consumerism, to gangs, and to terrorist groups. The latter preach a counterfeit gospel and a counterfeit insurgence. It's also why modern-day Christianity is so weak and ineffective.

It is high time for the gospel of the kingdom—the true gospel and the true insurgence—to be recovered today.

I'm writing this book, therefore, to stir your heart and set it aflame with a rediscovery of the glorious gospel of God's kingdom.¹

From Christian to Radical Jihadist



Jeff grew up in a Christian home in the West. He attended church regularly and even got involved in a Christian youth group. During his teens, Jeff experienced what most teenagers do: a crisis of identity, purpose, and meaning.

In his search, he encountered a recruiter for a terrorist organization that utilizes barbaric forms of violence to further their agenda. At first blush, Jeff was repulsed by the violence that marks this group. But as he continued to read their material, he was arrested by their allegiance, energy, comradery, and excitement.

He found the organization's vision for a worldwide utopia to be both beautiful and compelling. And he began to view the extremist group as a path to adventure. Everyone in the organization portrayed themselves to be "God's warriors," engaged in an important mission on the earth.

After being captivated by the jihadists' literature he was reading, Jeff made his way to Syria to meet the recruiter and the organization.

Jeff spent several months in Syria. At some point during his visit, Jeff gave his full allegiance to the militant jihadist organization. And he received training by its leaders for jihad ("holy war").

Jeff's devotion to the organization was so strong that he admitted he would be willing to execute people for his religion. He no longer identified himself by his country. The terrorist organization became his new identity.

You might ask how this could happen. How could a Western Christian join a terrorist organization known for its horrific violence against others?

Very simple. Jeff discovered a level of devotion, brotherhood, and sense of belonging to an important mission in the radical terrorist organization that was profoundly lacking in his Christian experience.

In terms of their devotion to their faith, Jeff's Christian friends were marginal at best. The radical jihadists were sold out, all in, fully committed, even to the point of giving their lives to the cause. They gave Jeff a profound sense of brotherhood, community, and having each other's backs.

By contrast, Jeff's Christian friends hardly knew one another, lacking deep relationships. They didn't feel that they were taking part in a great project, something cataclysmic, world-changing, and worth dying for. They were more excited about football, their careers, and their material possessions than they were about Jesus Christ.

Beyond going to church today and going to heaven later, Jeff's Christian experience lacked a compelling vision that gave him the reason to wake up every morning. Jeff found this strong sense of world-changing mission, purpose, and challenge in the radical terrorist group.

Here's the irony. If Jeff had lived in the first century, he would have found everything he witnessed in this radical terrorist organization in the early Christian community, minus the ruthless tactics, unbridled brutality, unspeakable horror, and barbarism.

Sadly, multitudes of Christians like Jeff have never heard the explosive, disruptive, earth-shaking gospel of the kingdom. Nor have they ever seen anyone live it out.

And that gospel and that kingdom are both true and real.

Sure, many people in the West haven't given their allegiance to a radical terrorist group. But they've given it to many other things that have nothing to do with Jesus Christ or His kingdom.

This glaring problem is precisely what motivated me to write this book, which I trust provides the remedy.*

* Unfortunately, Jeff is not alone among those who grew up in Christian homes only to join terrorist groups like ISIS later. For another example, see "ISIS and the Lonely Young American," by Rukmini Callimachi in the *New York Times*, June 27, 2015. According to that article, through January 2015, at least 100 Americans, among almost 4,000 Westerners, traveled to join jihadists in Syria and Iraq.

Two Enemies of the Gospel



“History,” Martin Luther said, “is like a drunk man on a horse. No sooner does he fall off on the left side, does he mount again and fall off on the right.”

The same can be said about the gospel that many (if not most) Christians hear today.

During Paul’s day, there were two different gospels that competed with his own. One was the gospel of legalism, which is rule-oriented. The other was the gospel of libertinism, which is self-oriented.

The New Testament letters, especially Paul’s, take dead aim at both of these. Yet these two gospels are alive and well in our day.

I believe they are the result of presenting a tamed, diluted, shrunken, reduced form of the true and only gospel found in the New Testament.

Let’s explore both of those gospels now.

Four Shades of Legalism



Legalism is the human attempt to gain God's favor by keeping rules, regulations, laws, and expectations.

Legalism is innate to fallen humanity. And it has affected virtually every Christian on the planet.

Because so much fog clouds the issue of legalism, I would like to do some fog-clearing and introduce you to the four different shades of legalism being preached today.

Shade 1 declares that you must believe in Jesus and obey God's Law (the Law of Moses) to be saved.

Shade 2 declares that you must believe in Jesus to *be* saved, but you must obey God's Law to *stay* saved. So believing *gets* you in, but obeying *keeps* you in.

Shade 3 declares that you must believe in Jesus to be saved, but you must obey God's Law to gain His favor and make Him happy.

Shade 4 says that you must believe in Jesus to be saved, but you must fulfill certain expectations to make God happy and earn His favor. These expectations are not explicitly found in the Bible.

Each shade of legalism seeks to win God's favor by human effort.

The Bait-and-Switch Gospel



Most contemporary Christians have been given a bait-and-switch gospel. Here's the bait:

Come just as you are. God accepts you. God loves you. It doesn't matter what you've done. Jesus wants to receive you because He loves you without condition.

So you take the bait and trust in Jesus. You're saved. Isn't it wonderful? Now you start going to church, reading Christian books, watching Christian television, and listening to Christian podcasts and radio.

And it dawns on you that the message has switched. The message now becomes,

God's holy, you're not, try harder.

And you're put under the bondage of some preacher's personal convictions laid upon you and everyone else.

As a result, you live in a state of guilt, constantly feeling that you're not doing enough nor measuring up. You're not praying enough, nor reading your Bible enough, nor making enough disciples, and on it goes.

This is how legalism works. It produces the guilt that Jesus Christ gave His life to remove.

The Gospel of Legalism



Legalism is bootstrap, white-knuckle, performance-based Christianity.

Legalists are people who believe that salvation is by grace alone, but sanctification (holiness) comes by one's own efforts to be a "good Christian."

Legalists tend to push their own personal standards onto everyone else. They are also quick to judge people's motives, thinking the worst of their intentions. Legalists confuse obedience with trying to serve God in one's own strength.

They demand that other people do things that they themselves could never carry out. They also regard the sins of others as more grievous than their own.

But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. (1 Peter 4:15 KJV)

Legalists are blind to their own self-righteousness. They pride themselves on being "clean" on the outside, without realizing that they are defiled on the inside.

For all of these reasons, legalists unwittingly bring a lot of pain and heartache into the lives of others. Yet sadly, they seem to be out of touch with this fact.

Forgive the personal reference, but when I was in my teens, I came to the Lord through a legalistic denomination. I was fed a steady diet of guilt, condemnation, and judgmentalism. And I was surrounded by other legalists who reinforced the message. Like most legalists, I was a legalist without realizing it.

But God was merciful.

The Gospel of Libertinism



In reaction to legalism and the devastation it brings, some have accepted the gospel of libertinism.

Libertinism is often called “easy believism” because it equates mental assent with biblical faith. A head nod to a statement of belief is not what the Bible means by the words “faith” and “believe.”

The gospel of libertinism teaches that because we are under grace, anything goes.

Libertines live the way they want, having skirted the lordship of Christ. They are inclined to justify carnality by pulling the “grace card,” the “I’m free in Christ” card, and the “don’t judge me” card.

For the libertine, grace becomes a license to live in the flesh and silence their conscience.

Some libertines have rationalized that they can continue to practice a particular transgression because (they think) God doesn’t really care, regardless of the carnage it brings.

A mark of sin is that it produces unnecessary pain to oneself and others. Sin and love are the exact opposites. Love is benefiting others at the expense of yourself. Sin is benefiting yourself at the expense of others. Sin is selfishness; love is selflessness.

Some libertines have gone so far in their deception that they have reinvented Jesus in their own image to justify their rebellion against God and clothed it with spiritual talk. Others have gone further off the beam and have become practical atheists.

In short, the libertine lives as if there is no God. The legalist lives as though she or he is God to everyone else.

Both attitudes are incompatible with the life of Christ and the kingdom of God. They are equally allergic to the insurgency.

Complicating Factors



What complicates the situation further is that the legalist doesn't know that he or she is a legalist and tends to view all non-legalists as libertines. By contrast, the libertine doesn't know that she or he is a libertine and tends to view all non-libertines as legalists.

Without the Holy Spirit's illumination, this deception is difficult, if not impossible, to break.

Legalism leads to the self-righteousness of the flesh. Libertinism leads to the defiling acts of the flesh. But the source of both is our flesh—the fallen nature. And both lead to bondage.

As J. I. Packer once put it,

There is no wisdom in jumping out of the frying pan into the fire, and if in our flight from legalism we fell into lawless license, our last state might well be worse than our first.²

The truth is, we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. And we all need is Jesus Christ to forgive, deliver, and keep us each day from both the defiling acts of the flesh on the one hand and the self-righteousness of the flesh on the other.

The Third Gospel



The third gospel is the gospel that Jesus, Paul, and the other apostles preached.

That gospel is not good advice, good philosophy, good ethics, good religion, good morality, or good views.

That gospel is good *news*.

In the first century, the words “gospel” and “evangelize” referred to heralding the good news that a new emperor had been installed in the Roman Empire. Heralds would go out to proclaim the good news, informing people that a new era of peace, salvation, and blessing had begun. They then exhorted people to get down on their knees to worship the new emperor.

The apostles used this same language to describe the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The gospel that the apostles preached was the announcement—the heralding—that Jesus of Nazareth had become this world’s true Emperor (Lord), launching a new era of peace, salvation, and blessing, and because of it, everything has changed.

This was the explosive gospel of the kingdom.

The Same Message, Different Names

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In the New Testament, the gospel goes by the following names:

- The gospel of the kingdom.
- The gospel of the kingdom of God.
- The gospel of the grace of God.
- The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- The gospel of our Lord Jesus.
- The gospel of Jesus Christ.
- The gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
- The gospel of His Son.
- The gospel of Christ.
- The gospel of the glory of Christ.
- The gospel of peace.
- The gospel of life.
- The gospel of your salvation.
- The gospel of God.
- The glorious gospel of the blessed God.
- The glorious gospel of Christ.
- The everlasting gospel.

All of these terms refer to the one and only gospel described in the New Testament. Paul called it “my gospel” and “our gospel.”

Tragically, over the last century, some Bible commentators have come up with novel inventions in which they have sliced and diced the New Testament up into different gospels for different people. But these inventions are erroneous and cannot be sustained upon close scrutiny.

The gospel of the kingdom is the good news about the universal kingship of Jesus of Nazareth in the earth. And it is a gospel of grace, salvation, and life.

Gospel Confusion



Years ago I made an eye-opening discovery. The kind of convert made is the result of the kind of gospel preached and received.

Since the mid-1900s, some commentators have divorced the gospel of the kingdom from the gospel of grace.* They've taught that the gospel of grace is mandatory for salvation, while the gospel of the kingdom is optional for discipleship.

Others have said that the gospel of the kingdom applies only to the nation of Israel, while the gospel of grace applies to everyone else.

Similarly, some have argued that the gospel that Paul preached was different from the gospel that Jesus preached.

All of these views are built on a proof-texting approach to Scripture—an approach that can be used to “prove” any doctrine, no matter how unbiblical.

However, if you read the entire story of Scripture as a free-flowing, unbroken narrative, you'll discover that the gospel of the kingdom, the gospel of grace, the gospel of Christ, the gospel of salvation, and so on are all different names for the same message.

And it is that bottled-up gospel that I will seek to unleash throughout the rest of this book.

* I'm speaking of the commentaries written by dispensationalists. The idea that the gospel of the kingdom was for the Jews and the gospel of grace is for the Gentiles began in the mid-nineteenth century with the Plymouth Brethren—the inventors of dispensationalism. Their doctrine was popularized by C. I. Scofield, who published his famous Scofield Study Bible in 1909. Scofield's Bible was used at Moody Bible Institute, and it spread throughout evangelical schools all across America. Although many evangelical scholars have refuted it throughout the years, the doctrine is still with us today.

Lordship and Liberty



One of the things I've learned in my spiritual journey is that the closer someone gets to Jesus Christ, the less judgmental, self-righteous, harsh toward others, and selfish he or she will be.

And the closer one gets to Christ, the more they will desire to know and live for God's ultimate purpose.

The lordship of Jesus Christ and the liberty of Christ are two sides of the same reality.

The gospel of the kingdom liberates us from the defiling acts of the flesh on the one hand and sets us free from the self-righteousness of the flesh on the other.

TAKING ACTION »

Reading a book without taking action is like flying a plane without landing. So before moving on to the next part of this book, I encourage you to take some time to implement what you've learned so far.

1. Ask yourself these questions. Your candid answers will prepare the soil of your heart for the next part of the book.

Do you recognize any legalistic tendencies in your heart? Some of the indicators are as follows:

- You feel that you're not doing enough to make God happy.
- Deep inside, you doubt God's love and His complete acceptance of you as His child.
- You are quick to think the worst of other people and impute bad motives to their hearts.
- You tend to maximize the sins of others as being worse than your own.
- You feel at liberty to interrogate people—even those you don't know very well—for alleged sins, when you yourself would hate for someone to interrogate you the same way.
- You have a tendency to put your own personal convictions and standards on other believers, judging them according to the dictates of your own conscience (see Romans 14 for this problem).

Do you recognize any libertine tendencies in your heart? Some of the indicators are as follows:

- It doesn't bother you when you violate one of the Lord's clear commandments in Scripture.
- There is little difference between you and those who don't know Christ in the way you talk, the language you use, the kinds of jokes you tell or laugh at, and the hobbies and forms of entertainment you enjoy.

- You feel that because you're under grace, you can do anything you want and there will be no spiritual consequences.
 - You don't believe that God disciplines His children.
 - You have no sense or understanding of what's worldly.
2. Ask the Lord to shine His light into your heart, revealing where you stand with Him with respect to legalism and libertinism. More light will be shed on this topic as you read further.