The Very Good Gospel
Chapters 1 & 2

But first a note from Chris…

What is the "Gospel"? How would you answer that question? Would your answer line up with historical, orthodox Christianity? More importantly, would your answer line up with Jesus who we're told, "*…went throughout Galiliee…preaching the gospel of the kingdom…*" (Matthew 4:23, emphasis added).

Later in the Gospel of Matthew (which, by the way, we will be going through during Lent in 2026) Jesus says, "*And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*" (Matthew 24:14, emphasis added).

In the Gospel of Mark we read, "*The time has come, [Jesus said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the gospel*". (Mark 1:15, emphasis added) Later in Mark we read, "*[Jesus] said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.*" (Mark 16:15, emphasis added)

In the Gospel of Luke we read, "*One day as He was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel…*" (Luke 20:1, emphasis added) From the book of Acts (which Luke also wrote) we learn that the early followers of Jesus did exactly that…

- "*Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the gospel that Jesus is the Christ.*" (5:42, emphasis added)

- "*But when they believed Philip as he preached the gospel of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women."* (8:12, emphasis added)

- "*When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages."* (8:25, emphasis added)

- "*[Paul And Barnabas] preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples.*" (14:21, emphasis added)

Incidentally the word "gospel" simply means "good news" or "good message" (gospel & good news are used interchangeably by New Testament translators).

BUT what is this news/message that Jesus and His followers went around preaching? What was the substance/content of the news/message? What's good about it? What relevance does it have to us? (Spoiler alert: A LOT! …as we'll see as we go through this book/series.)

- *What is "the gospel"? Write out your understanding/articulation of it.*

****Table Group Leaders–as always I will provide more discussion questions than you will likely be able to use. Please keep in mind that the goal is not to get through all the questions. Rather, simply choose a few that you think will generate good conversation with your group. (Or, better yet, allow mine to just be a spark for you to come up with your own discussion questions.) Also, we're going through this book at a pretty good clip–two chapters per week for most weeks–so you may need to encourage your folks that they can do it, though it may mean watching a little less TV…which, let's face it, we could all probably benefit from.*
*FYI, at the end of each chapter in the book–minus the first chapter which functions as an introduction–there is a "reflection exercise". Use it, or not, as you see fit. Our weekly Soul Training Exercises may or may not tie to them. Finally, above all else, please remember that good, healthy, joy-filled RELATIONSHIPS are what we're primarily trying to cultivate in Table Groups. The content/lesson/discussion is secondary.****

<u>Chapter 1 ~ The Very Good Gospel</u>

- *What historic injustice really grips your heart, really appalls you, really makes you ask, "How could that have happened?" (Particularly perpetrated by those claiming to carry the gospel.)*

- *On the top of page 2 Lisa Sharon Harper (LSH from here on out) offers a version of the gospel/good news many Christians have been taught. How does that compare to what you've been taught? (If you tried your hand at the earlier prompt to write out your understanding of the gospel, how does it compare?)*

LSH states, "*The good news was both about the <u>coming</u> of the Kingdom of God and the <u>character</u> of that Kingdom. It was about what God's Kingdom looked like. It was about what citizenship in God's Kingdom requires. The biblical gospel writers' good news was about the restoration of shalom.*" (pg. 6) Notice it doesn't say anything about where we go when we die.

There is an unfortunate tendency to compartmentalize things into spiritual issues and social/legal/economic issues, as if they have nothing to do with one another. The consequence of this disconnection is that "spiritual" things end up becoming less "real" and relevant, less prioritized, rather optional. As LSH points out on page 7, leaders of the Second Great Awakening, like Charles Finney (who followed the lead of Jesus and the writers of Scripture), didn't operate from that kind of false dichotomy. To say it another way, peace (shalom) and justice are core to the Kingdom of God, thus core to the Gospel…and our response to the Gospel ought to reflect that.

The common characteristics of early/classic American Evangelicalism (not to be confused with the contemporary Evangelical movement) as stated by David Bebbington–known as Bebbington's Quadrilateral are:

1. Conversionism
2. Activism

3. Biblicism
4. Crucicentrism

(see pages 7-8 for further descriptions) It should be noted that John Wesley (the founder of Methodism) was such an Evangelical.

- *As you consider your own faith, how do your beliefs and convictions compare to Bebbinton's Quadrilateral? (see pages 7-8)*

It is common today to hear something like, "*The Church shouldn't be involved in politics*." Or, "*The Church should focus on spiritual matters, not social justice*." Such statements and sentiments reflect the false dichotomy described earlier. Honestly, and being as charitable as I can, I chalk that up to ignorance. As LSH rightly states, "*The Scriptures are not silent on structural and systemic sin. The Bible overflows with God's response to poverty, oppression, and governance."* (pg. 9) (Being less charitable, I would chalk it up to hard-heartedness, greed, complicity with an evil system, etc.)

Friends, the Gospel has real life consequences. The reality of Jesus and His Kingdom affects EVERY aspect of life…no exceptions.

- *On pages 10-11 LSH comments on Thin vs Thick Faith. How does your observation and experience of faith line up to what she describes? What do you think of her assessment?*

- *Would you describe your own faith as "thick" or "thin"? What is your criteria for your assessment?*

LSH says, "*Shalom is the stuff of the Kingdom*." (pg. 13) I wholeheartedly agree. But a question that came to my mind as I was reading and processing this chapter is, "*Can we expect the countries/nations of the world to reflect the Kingdom of God?*" I can say beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Church should absolutely reflect the Kingdom…that's our job, our calling. And, yes, ultimately the entire world will be enveloped into the Kingdom (or to say it a different way, the ultimate end is the Kingdom of God coming fully to earth). But in the meantime, how much can we rightly expect the countries/nations to reflect the Kingdom? I've wrestled with this for years, quite honestly.

In the spirit of "*take the plank/log out of your own eye*" (see Matthew 7:3-5) it seems to me that we have plenty of work to do within the Church to reflect the Shalom/Peace of the Kingdom. The Church is meant to be an alternative society that demonstrates to the rest of the world how to live rightly under the world's true King.

As we're told in I Peter 2:9, "*But [the Church is] a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness and into His wonderful light*." I think it's only proper to expect that those who pledge their allegiance to Christ as King are the first to be expected to live out the shalom of the Kingdom. The rest may or may not follow our lead…but our job is simply to be faithful/loyal regardless.

- *So the question isn't whether or not the Church should be "political". The Church is a political entity, a body politic. Thus, a better question might be, how or in what ways are we going to be political? (However we do that, it needs to reflect the character of the Kingdom…particularly when it comes to our use of power.) What are some ways the Church could reflect, represent, manifest the Kingdom in the world?*

- *In your estimation, how can the Church more accurately and more fully reflect/represent the Kingdom of God? What is your/our role in that?*

This chapter briefly mentions Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism. If you would like to learn a little bit more about them, here's a couple of short videos from our friends at the Holy Post.

▶ What is an "Evangelical?"

▶ What's Fueling Fundamentalism?

<u>Chapter 2 ~ A Glimpse of Shalom</u>

I suspect that most of us are relatively familiar with the Creation story from the book of Genesis. What we may be less familiar with are the many other creation stories/myths that exist from antiquity. It is important to realize that the writers and compilers of the Bible were living in a real context and writing mostly in response to their pagan neighbors and oppressors. Their ultimate aim was to show the uniqueness and superiority of their God…who is God over all.

The Bible opens up with an introduction to the main character of the Bible–God (Elohim in Hebrew)–who created and ordered everything. Because God is good, His creation is good. And His creation has a purpose.

- *How do you refer to God? (For example, when you pray, how do you address God?)*

Speaking of God, it is also important to know that "God" is not God's name. Our English word "god" and the Hebrew "Elohim" are generic, rather nondescript titles. (So, for example, the saying "God bless America" isn't actually saying much. We know who we mean by America, but who is actually being referenced by "God"?) God, in fact, is referred to by many different titles or monikers throughout Scripture. The very first, and most frequent, is who we're introduced to in Genesis 1:1–Elohim.

Whereas today we are more likely to discuss scientific explanations versus Biblical explanations of the origin of the universe. Ancient peoples explained the origin of life through epic narratives that were violent, lewd, and rather soap opera drama-like. In this way, the Bible's description of Elohim's activity stands in stark contrast.

- *What makes you think that we need to hear from God today? In what situations (be it personally, nationally, globally) do you want God to bring order out of chaos, peace (shalom) out of brokenness?*

LSH writes, "*...in God's governance, God did not eliminate the source of fear and worry...God is above the people's greatest source of fear in the same way that the Spirit of God was positioned over the deep.*" (pg. 23) Ancient people were deathly afraid of the sea and the creatures that inhabited it. So, throughout Scripture the sea metaphorically represents that which people fear. This is fitting due to the sea's enormity and uncontrolability. We naturally fear things that are bigger than us and that we can't control. This applies to things in nature and also to structural evil. Consider how powerless many of us feel at the hands of the government...it's big, unruly, we can't control it much, yet it affects us greatly. God allows scary things to exist so that we will turn our attention to Him and learn to trust Him.

<u>Image ~ tselem</u>

The idea of humans as the image/tselem of God, "*...is a bold, even revolutionary, challenge to the dominant view regarding who represented God on earth. At that time, only kings and queens were considered representatives of deity. In direct opposition to the prevailing view, the writers of Genesis 1 democratize dignity by redistributing it to all humanity.*" (pg. 25) This seems to be a point we have yet to grasp. The implication LSH is driving at is that hierarchies and the centralization of power are antithetical to God's good created order.

Once we grasp this basic core principle, found on page one of the Bible, that humans are the image of God, the groundwork is laid for justice. Or, to say it a different way, where there is injustice and oppression, we can know that the basic principle that humans are the image of God has been forgotten...or intentionally set aside.

We like, no we love, the idea of equality. Rightly so. But what we need to understand is that this idea comes from page one of the Bible. Or, to say it another way, if we dismiss or deny the opening claim of the Bible, we have no basis for the idea of equality. Sadly, human history demonstrates that, for the most part, people don't actually believe in or want equality. What makes me say this? Simply look at how pervasively throughout time and place a few people dominate, control, rule over the rest. Such an arrangement is antithetical to the Kingdom of God.

<u>Dominion ~ radah</u>

In Genesis 1 we're also told that the vocation of humans, to have dominion/radah over creation. But as LSH points out, "*Radah equalizes power. No one is too low to exercise agency to steward God's creation. Likewise, no one can add value to his or her soul through the pursuit and exercise of power. We all are equally powerful, and we all are equally vulnerable.*" (pgs. 29-30) This, yet again, is another core lesson we seem to conveniently forget. Humans aren't meant to rule over one another, yet we seem to insist on creating systems where we do exactly

that. History and current news demonstrate the outcome. Instead, we are meant to cooperatively work for the shalom of the world. That's what dominion in the likeness of God looks like.

Likeness ~ dmuwth

Our dominion of the earth is meant to reflect that of God's, since it is His likeness (dmuwth) in which we are made. Fast-forwarding a bit, the best, most accurate representation of what it looks like for God to have dominion is what we see in Jesus hanging on the Cross. (Talk about a game changer.)

We can either use our agency/power creatively and cooperatively or destructively and selfishly. Sadly, we generally opt for the latter. Being a disciple/apprentice of Jesus means learning to use our power/agency the way Jesus did/does…the way we were originally meant to.

- *What is the difference between dominion and domination? (Feel free to Google it.)*

- *What do you have dominion over? How are you exercising dominion?*

Very good ~ tov me'od

Please don't miss this: What is considered "very good"/tov me'od? Not simply everything that was made, but the interconnection between everything that was made. Another word for that is "relationship". In order for something to be "very good", the connection/relationship between it and everything else needs to be good, or as it should be. This is the idea of Shalom, Peace, things being as they should be in relation to each other.

Please pay attention to the summary/implications that LSH concludes the chapter with (see pages 32-34)…

- ➢ *All humanity is made in the image of God.*
- ➢ *All humanity is created with the call and capacity to exercise dominion.*
- ➢ *To diminish the capacity of humans to exercise dominion is to diminish the image of God on earth.*
- ➢ *If humanity is created in God's likeness, then the way we exercise dominion should reflect God's kind of dominion.*

"*To exercise dominion that seeks one's own well-being first is to break from the likeness of God.*" (pg. 34) This harkens back to the final week of Advent…Love. God is Love. Love is outward-facing, focused on willing and working for the good of others.

- *What thoughts, feelings, ideas are evoked in you as you consider what the opening page of the Bible has to say about Image, Likeness, Dominion?*

For Further Study (if you're interested)...

List of creation myths - Wikipedia

God Has a Name ... Many Actually!

Soul Training Exercise ~ Evaluating our Connections
(This is basically just a simplified version of the Reflection Exercise on pages 34-36...feel free to refer to that for a fuller description...or just do that exercise.)

Spend some time considering and reflecting upon your connection (relationship) with God, Others, Creation, and Yourself. What is "good" or as it should be? What is not so good, not as it should be? Upon what basis or standard are you making your assessment? What specifically would you like to see changed...or what do you think needs to be changed? What is your role and responsibility in those connections/relationships?

Spend some time with God reflecting/praying on this.

Know that God wants these connections/relationships to be good (very good)...as He intended. Trust that God wants it even more than we do, and that He will help us steward these relationships...helping us be "tov me'od".