

## The Land of God Gospel as Place

By Scott Bessenecker

### The Gospel

When you search for the words “the gospel of” in the New Testament, Matthew finishes the phrase with, “the kingdom.” Luke likes to talk about “the *good news* of the kingdom.” This *news* is the central message of Jesus. “News that will bring great joy to all people” (Luke 2:10).

The news Jesus preached was about a *place* more than a profession of faith. It is a realm not a religion. More of a nation than a denomination. The gospel has dimensionality – materially, economically, socially, and politically. An outpost of heaven located on the earth. I know because I’ve been there. It is located in Kolkata slum community.

There is a textile factory in the middle of a red-light district in Kolkata operated by a business called [Joyya](#). In 1999 Kerry Hilton moved his family from New Zealand to that area. They wanted to establish God’s kingdom inside the largest red-light district in Asia. I have visited there on a couple of occasions and found myself standing inside the gospel.

The 250 former sex-workers chattered away as Kerry and I walked around the factory floor. They were confident ladies, at peace with themselves and with those around them.

“They’re all paid the same wage,” Kerry told me. “Ten-hour days, and hard work, but it’s a living wage.” A living wage is good news to the economically marginalized.

Childcare is provided in the factory, along with a savings account and retirement plan. The workers begin each day looking at a Bible passage together and end the day with some reflection and snacks.

“I get requests for employment every day from women working the streets,” he said as we wandered around the facility. “We can’t take them all in just yet. We’re competing with factories in China or Bangladesh which don’t pay as much and don’t use ethically sourced material or eco-friendly dyes. Their products are cheaper, but economic justice and environmental sustainability are important.”

Then, he shouted out to the women in the room, “What are we making?”

The women responded in unison, “Freedom!”

I realized then that it was not a tee-shirt factory. They were sewing the kingdom of God on earth, and they knew that the harder they worked the more that could join them. The gospel was a place sitting inside a slum community, with all the fauna and flora of a densely populated informal settlement. But this concrete building possessed more life and joy and peace than any wealthy, suburban neighborhood I’d been in. Even more than some church communities I’ve been in. It made such an impression that I wrote [this poem](#) as a tribute.

## **The Land of God**

The kingdom of God is enchanting. That's why I prefer the term Land of God. It sounds like a land in a children's story, and Jesus said we must become like a child to enter it. The Land of God is mysterious, and it's ruled by a benevolent king. It's a world where strange and amazing things take place. The empires of this world exploit the vulnerable. Its economics reward those who plunder the environment. Money gravitates to the center while some people are pushed to the margins. In contrast, the economics in the Land of God are centrifugal, pushing resources out to the edges. The social forces are magnetic, drawing the excluded into the center.

Immigrants are invited to pledge allegiance to the ruler of the Land of God. And this nation-state doesn't allow dual citizenship. You cannot pledge allegiance to the empires that rule this world and still be a citizen of the Land of God because one master will require you to love your enemy while the other may command you to kill your enemy. In the Land of God, all things move toward shalom. Peace with God, peace with self, peace with others and peace with creation. And while there may still be hardship and sin and imperfection, the Land of God is always in the process of becoming.

### **Peace with God**

Peace with God shapes our sense of well-being, our ability to form healthy intimacy with others, and our connectedness to creation. It is a primal peace. One all humans long for. To experience this peace, we must acknowledge our acts of injustice, collectively and individually. The Divine One took on flesh in the person of Jesus to create a path to peace. In his victory over death and sin we are invited to trade our brokenness for Christ's wholeness, our sin for his righteousness. Not all the women in the Kolkata textile factory identify as Christian, but a relationship with God is a value in that place. Peace with God serves as the pattern of shalom that rules all other relationships.

### **Peace with Others**

The Creator exists in community with Christ and the Holy Spirit. This sacred community made us relational beings. Humans cannot procreate or thrive without profound connection with others. Our inter-dependence is a picture of the Trinity. To be true image bearers we must exist in harmony with others. Social harmony may never be completely experienced but the textile workers at Joyya are moving toward holistic, relational peace, acknowledging the ways they've wounded each other and extending forgiveness to those who've wounded them.

### **Peace with Self**

Peace with self is made possible through peace with God because we are forced to come to terms with our wounds and the ways we've wounded others. We cannot love ourselves unless we have told the truth about ourselves. Then we can recognize our frailty and brokenness while embracing the Divine image we bear. We can honestly face our faults as well as our beauty. The voice of the inner critic is silenced by the voice of the Outer Advocate. God's assessment of our value is the foundation upon which we can build a healthy love of self. The women of Joyya are learning to love themselves despite the way others have judged them.

### **Peace with Creation**

Everything in the universe is a sibling to us humans because we all share the same Divine parentage. The Genesis story locates humans as stewards of a garden. "Be fruitful and fill the earth," God tells them. The Hebrew word for fill (*mala*) can also be translated satisfy or fulfill. There is

something about our design that satisfies the earth. The forces of this world call us to exploit creation for our own gain, but the gospel is a place where humans bring life to the earth and animate fruitfulness. Leaders in the Kolkata textile factory care for the earth by ensuring creation is respected in how they source their product or dispose of materials.

### **Holistic Peace**

The gospel is a place where peace with God, peace with others, peace with self, and peace with creation is being advanced. I've seen it in Kolkata, India and in places where citizens of God's land are forging shalom in the empires of injustice and oppression.

"Of the increase of his government and his peace there shall be no end." Is. 9:7