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Reclaiming The Kingdom of God Metaphor for the Twenty-First-Century Church

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

RECLAIMING THE KINGDOM OF GOD METAPHOR FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST-
CENTURY CHURCH

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BY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Words Define the Kingdom.....	6
Biblical Metaphors Define the Kingdom.....	8
Characteristics of Christ’s Mission Define the Kingdom:.....	10
CHAPTER TWO: KINGDOM THEOLOGY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.....	13
Jesus’ Kingdom Priority.....	13
Jesus’ Kingdom Parables.....	20
Jesus’ Kingdom Miracles.....	39
CHAPTER THREE: THE UNIVERSAL KINGDOM OF GOD.....	57
The Universal Kingdom of God – Defined.....	57
The Universal Kingdom of God – Assumed.....	60
The Universal Kingdom of God – Aspirational.....	63
The Universal Kingdom of God – Actual.....	77
CHAPTER FOUR: THE KINGDOM OF GOD: A METAPHOR FOR SANCTIFICATION.....	80
A Synthesized Definition of Sanctification.....	81
Common Synonyms of Sanctification.....	84
Framing the Kingdom Metaphor.....	89
Kingdom Characteristics as Synonyms for Sanctification.....	90
Sanctification as Kingdom Witness.....	96
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCIPLES OF CHRIST: KINGDOM AMBASSADORS.....	102
Discipleship: A Working Definition.....	103
Discipleship and Transformation.....	105
Discipleship and Evangelism.....	108
Discipleship and Christian Education.....	112
Discipleship and Discipline.....	116
Summary.....	119
CHAPTER SIX: IMPLEMENTING A KINGDOM OF GOD DISCIPLESHIP MODEL IN A LOCAL CHURCH CONTEXT.....	120
Cursing the Darkness: Summary of Conclusions.....	120
Lighting a Candle: Three Key Components to the Implementation Process.....	133
Emotional Health.....	133

Spiritual Habits (Personal).....	140
Spiritual Habits (Corporate).....	143
Gifts of the Holy Spirit	145
Conclusion	148
BIBLIOGRAPHY	150

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I will argue that an egocentric eschatology (preoccupation with what happens to the individual at the moment of death) has unwittingly trumped the importance of incarnating the Kingdom of God in this present world. It is my assertion that a better understanding of Kingdom of God theology and the promotion of its priority will inspire Christian discipleship leading to reformation and renewal in the church.

For this to happen, we must fundamentally renovate our definition and articulate the meaning of “Kingdom of God” as His sovereign reign and rule over a people He has called out, set apart, and sent forth to carry out His mission in the world.

This Kingdom is both a present reality and a future hope. It exists already, but it is not yet fully realized. The supreme and sovereign reign of Christ has been established through His sinless life, sacrificial death, and bodily resurrection. All authority in Heaven and on earth is His. His reign was victoriously inaugurated, and it will be finally consummated when He returns at the end of this age.

Christ’s Kingly influence has continued to expand from the time of His ascension to the present day and it will progress until the Second Advent. During this age, God is drawing to Himself a people from every nation, tribe, and language. We call this gathering of people the Church, and its members are citizens, ambassadors, and witnesses of His Kingdom on earth.

A problem I have observed in a rural Wesleyan context is that an inaccurate and inadequate theology of the Kingdom has inadvertently undermined the priority of spiritual formation and gospel ministry. An inordinate emphasis on “going to heaven when I die” has subjugated the primacy of the Kingdom of God. The question for our

consideration then is, how might redeeming and redefining a biblical Kingdom of God metaphor revitalize spiritual passion in rural Wesleyan churches?

Myles Munro summarizes this conflict very well: “One of God’s biggest challenges in getting His message of the Kingdom to the world is the fact that we who are His witnesses on earth are so slow to understand the message. Dreams of golden streets and heavenly bliss have blinded us to our responsibilities on earth.”¹

In this dissertation I will argue the case that improving our understanding of Kingdom citizenship (its privileges and responsibilities) will help the church refocus her attention on the task of reproducing Christ-like disciples; ambassadors and witnesses of the Kingdom of God in the present age.

¹ Myles Munroe, *Rediscovering the Kingdom: Ancient Hope for Our 21st Century World* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2004), 135.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

It was in the coffee line immediately following our annual Christmas Eve service that I engaged in a seemingly harmless holiday conversation. Noel turned to me and said, “I was listening to a local radio station today and people were calling in to talk about the best Christmas gift they ever received. I intended to call and say ‘the best Christmas gift I ever received was...*Heaven*.’”¹ I was thoroughly expecting her to say “Jesus” and I confess I was disillusioned. I wanted to challenge her theology, but in the spirit of Christmas I held my tongue.

Noel unwittingly disclosed a soteriological *faux pas* that I have discovered is common among members of small Wesleyan churches, particularly in rural settings. People in this context regularly talk about salvation primarily as it relates to heaven. Testimonies are often summarized or reduced to “I accepted Jesus into my heart,” or “I prayed the prayer of Salvation and when I die I will go to heaven.” Myles Munroe said, “Being born again is the way into the Kingdom—it is the necessary first step. But the Gospel of the Kingdom involves much more.”²

This unsophisticated and incomplete way of describing salvation is to be expected of children articulating their first steps of faith, but it is disconcerting when mature adults describe their personal redemption story as a past tense event with a future tense reward and nothing between.³ This is the language of religion as opposed to the more desirous

¹ While this conversation actually occurred, “Noel” is not the person’s real name; names throughout this dissertation will be changed to protect the guilty unless otherwise noted.

² Munroe, 133.

³ Mature in age and perhaps in number of years affiliated with “church,” but clearly not mature in a biblical or spiritual sense of the word.

language of relationship. Something is missing...the Christian life, the journey of faith, discipleship, ultimately Kingdom citizenship.

Theresa was a retired missionary living in a nursing home. She had served along with her husband in medical missions in South Africa many years ago. She was in her late eighties and she had convinced herself that her usefulness as a human being was exhausted. I regularly visited, hoping to encourage her and to help her remember that she was valuable to God and others. Each time she repeated her tearful appeal, "Pastor, why hasn't the Lord taken me home? I just want to go to Heaven." I would again remind her that she still had a vital role to play. While it was true that her environment had changed and even limited her in many ways, the Holy Spirit still indwelled her and where she was He too was present. Her path intersected each day with people who mattered to God, and though her mission field had changed, she was a person of influence in the lives of her peers and caregivers. Furthermore, her husband, her son, and her community loved and cherished her.

The perspective shared by Noel and Theresa is not uncommon. Many Christians are preoccupied with two dates: the date of their spiritual birth and the date of their physical death; not unlike the two dates inscribed on tombstones of the departed separated by a dash which subordinates everything in between these two dates "Born – Died", or in the case of the Christian "Born again – Glorified." This mentality is pithily expressed in the saying "some Christians are so heavenly minded they are of no earthly good." For these, the phrase Kingdom of God conjures up images of celestial real estate; and when they recite "Thy Kingdom come" in the Lord's Prayer they are imploring Him to hasten the *Parousia* as if the Kingdom were solely a future hope. However, the New

Testament speaks of the Kingdom of God as a present experience, progressing and expanding until it is finally fulfilled or consummated at the end of the age; it is both present and future, already and not yet⁴.

David Naugle laments the inconsistency with which Christians define the Kingdom of God:

There is little if any agreement about what the Kingdom is or how it should be defined. There is not much understanding about its identity among the rank and file in our churches either. Some believe that God's Kingdom is the same as heaven. Catholics (and some Protestants) tend to equate it with the institutional church (so the phrase "Kingdom work" means "church work"). Pietists locate the Kingdom of God in the heart and connect it with the spiritual life. Liberal Christians associate God's Kingdom with social reform (as in the social gospel). Others still believe that the Kingdom is still future and will be established for the Jews during the 1,000 year reign of Jesus on the earth.⁵

It is my contention that these erroneous notions of the Kingdom of Heaven undermine the process of discipleship and the pursuit of holiness. While the Bible has much to say about the inaugurated Kingdom of God and the yet to be consummated Kingdom of God, it has very little to say about the intermediate state of the departed. How do we help Christ followers follow Christ now? How might we demonstrate and communicate the journey component of a necessarily growing relationship with Jesus as the King of our lives in the here and now? We simply must develop a Christocentric, Kingdom-oriented model of discipleship.

⁴ Throughout this project I will be defining the Scriptural metaphor of the Kingdom of God (*Basileia*) as God's Kingly rule, authority, and sovereign power: the dominion of Christ, His redeemed people being His domain. It is not my intention to discuss the eschatological nature of Kingdom language. I will be focusing on the "already" aspect of the Kingdom rather than the "not yet."

⁵ "Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God," Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God, <http://www.colsoncenter.org/the-center/columns/indepth/15062-jesus-christ-and-the-kingdom-of-god> (accessed September 17, 2013).

It might be suggested that a Kingdom metaphor for the 21st-century church in America is not worth redeeming. After all, American Christians understand the language of democracy rather than monarchy. Perhaps much of the confusion related to this topic is simply due to the fact that we live in a democratic society, and kingdom verbiage is foreign and unfamiliar. In addition, the Biblical language concerning the Kingdom of God is shrouded with ambiguity and does not provide a concise working definition that resonates with a linear, Western mode of thinking.

Despite these challenges and concerns, it will be demonstrated that Kingdom of God terminology is worth resurrecting because it is thoroughly Biblical. Moreover, the idea of democracy is nonexistent in Scripture. Munroe emphatically argues, “A kingdom is diametrically opposed to a democracy. Living successfully in the Kingdom of God will require of us a complete mental reversal. We cannot be effective citizens of the Kingdom of God and continue to think democratically.”⁶ For all of its challenges, reclaiming a Kingdom of God motif for the church is compelling because the teachings of Jesus and the broader New Testament narratives are replete with kingdom language and imagery.

In chapter two of this dissertation, I will present a survey of New Testament passages focusing on the parables and miracles of Jesus. This analysis will show that the fundamental purpose of the first Advent was the introduction and inauguration of the Kingdom of God.

In chapter three, I will consider the historical and universal aspect of the Kingdom and examine the question, to what extent is the Kingdom of God as a present possession *assumed*, in what ways is it *aspirational*, and how can it be *actually* received during the inaugurated interim reign of Christ through His Church in this present age?

⁶ Munroe, 114.

Hyper-pluralism (the splintering of the institutional church into thousands of Christian denominations) has weakened the churches Kingdom witness, but it cannot abolish it. The aim of this section is to honestly assess and ascertain in what sense the victorious Kingdom of God is invisible, indivisible and universal.

While chapters two and three primarily focus on the corporate nature of the Kingdom, in chapter four I will demonstrate how the Wesleyan/Arminian⁷ understanding of the doctrine of Entire Sanctification is a synonym for receiving or entering the Kingdom of God, and is the means by which individuals submit to the dominion, authority and sovereignty of Christ.

In chapter five we will consider the question, *what characterizes the lifestyle of a citizen of the Kingdom of God?* Discipleship is the pathway and process by which a Christ follower learns how to live as a Kingdom citizen, ultimately finding pleasure in and bringing pleasure to the King. We will attempt to differentiate discipleship from the traditional Christian education model, formation from information, and finally consider what it means to be conformed to the image of Christ. One of the keys to this end will be the rediscovery and exercise of historical Christian spiritual disciplines and an integration of the importance of mental/emotional health as a vital aspect of discipleship.

Chapter six is intended to demonstrate practical steps a local church can implement toward a renovation in how it defines and communicates Kingdom citizenship as it relates to the present tense life of Christ's followers. It will also seek to defend and validate the case for redeeming this biblical metaphor for a 21st-century audience.

⁷ While I will entertain the spectrum of interpretations relating to the doctrine of Sanctification, I will be largely defining "entire" Sanctification in Wesleyan terms, as this dissertation context is small rural Wesleyan churches.

Words Define the Kingdom

The English word Kingdom is translated from the Greek term *Basileia* that is used more than 160 times in the New Testament.⁸ The Hebrew equivalent is *Malkuth* and virtually all biblical scholars define these terms as the “kingly rule, reign, sovereign authority” of God. The Kingdom of God is not defined in geographical, spatial, physical, temporal, or territorial terms. William Barclay describes it this way, “it is not a domain, but the dominion of God. We see then that the Kingdom of God does not mean a territory in which God is King; it means a condition of the heart and mind and will where God is Lord of all.”⁹

This definition of the Kingdom then, begs the question, can the church expand, enlarge, advance, or build God’s Kingdom? Darrell Guder suggests, “The announcement of God’s reign no where includes an invitation to go out and build it, nor to extend it. These are not New Testament ways of speaking about the reign of God... The New Testament employs the words *receive* and *enter*.”¹⁰ The conception of the church building the Kingdom is a misnomer; the people of God receive, embrace, submit to the Kingly Rule of Christ by faith as we are called and welcomed by the Holy Spirit to become citizens of his Kingdom. Guder warns, neither is the church the guardian of the Kingdom nor should it be equated with the Kingdom. This view causes the church to see

⁸ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 118.

⁹ William Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 30.

¹⁰ Lois Y. Barrett and Darrell Guder L. *Missional Church: a Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publ., 1998), 93-94.

itself as the Kingdom's "author and benefactor, rather than its grateful recipient and guest."¹¹

According to George Eldon Ladd, "Men cannot build the Kingdom, they cannot erect it. The Kingdom is the Kingdom of God; it is God's reign, God's rule. God has entrusted the Gospel of the Kingdom to men. It is our responsibility to proclaim the Good News about the Kingdom. But the actual working of the Kingdom is God's working."¹² David Naugle reminds us that the "ancient church theologians referred to Christ as the *autobasileia*... Himself the Kingdom."¹³

As the Body of Christ and the continuation of His incarnational presence in the world, the church does have the privilege and duty to reflect the character and priorities of Christ and His Kingly rule. Consequently, we "represent the reign of God" in the way "a lawyer represents her client or the Secretary of State represents the President in a meeting."¹⁴ In the same vein, Craig Van Gelder argues, "The church is God's demonstration plot in the world. Its very existence demonstrates that His redemptive reign has already begun. Its very presence invites the world to watch, listen, examine and consider accepting God's reign as a superior way of living."¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., 98.

¹² George Eldon Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing. Kindle Edition.), 64.

¹³ "Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God." Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. <http://www.colsoncenter.org/the-center/columns/indepth/15062-jesus-christ-and-the-kingdom-of-god> (accessed September 17, 2013).

¹⁴ Barrett and Guder, 101.

¹⁵ Craig VanGelder, *The Essence of the Church: a Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 100.

In his instructive book, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms*, author David VanDrunen contends that God has established “two kingdoms by means of two covenants. The covenant with Noah (Genesis 9) formally establishes and regulates the *common kingdom*. The covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15,17) formally establishes and regulates the *redemptive kingdom*.”¹⁶ VanDrunen’s thesis is that God universally governs the common kingdom by virtue of His authority over all creation. God’s redemptive kingdom refers to His reign over a particular people, (Old Testament Israel and the New Testament *ecclesia*.) This position is based on the author’s understanding of General versus Special revelation. It illustrates God’s sovereign authority over everything and demonstrates His unique relationship to humanity including those who have not received His *Basileia*. VanDrunen’s position is strikingly comparable to the Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace (leading grace, preventing grace), which also affirms God’s activity and immanent involvement in the lives of those who have not yet been redeemed.

Biblical Metaphors Define the Kingdom

Any attempt to define the kingdom exclusively with a word study will yield a definition that is too vague to function as a practical motif for the church. New Testament metaphors assist in fleshing out a more comprehensive understanding of the Kingdom than etymology alone.

The phrase “Kingdom of God” is itself a metaphor; a figure of speech or literary device used to provoke and stimulate visual images as a means of discovering deeper

¹⁶ David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 75-76.

understanding. James Geary states, “The truth is, metaphor is astonishingly precise. Nothing is as exact as an apt metaphor.”¹⁷

The use of metaphor and symbolism in Scripture is prolific. The Bible does not specifically define the Kingdom of God; it demonstrates what the Kingdom is like through the use of metaphor, parables, miracles, and practical examples. The vehicle of human language cannot sufficiently communicate the mystery of the Kingdom. Therefore, the New Testament employs a plethora of images that cultivate a fuller and richer impression than vocabulary alone might convey. According to Hans Küng, the Kingdom “cannot be described, but only made known in metaphors: as the new covenant, the seed sprung up, the ripe harvest, the great banquet, the royal feast.”¹⁸

Another aspect of the dominion of the Kingdom of God is revealed through symbolic language used to distinguish the cosmic conflict with the enemy, which Jesus referred to as “the binding of the strong man”. Van Gelder reminds us that, “The enemy has been defeated and is bound. Although his power still operates, he has encountered someone stronger: greater is he who is in the children of the kingdom than he who is in the world.”¹⁹ In this metaphor we observe that characteristics of the Kingdom can be defined both positively and negatively through the use of figurative language. While the use of metaphor is valuable in helping to establish a full-orbed definition of the Kingdom of God, their ambiguity can function as a double-edged sword leading often to

¹⁷ James Geary, *I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 19.

¹⁸ Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.) 39.

¹⁹ Van Gelder, 83.

understanding, but sometimes confusion as well. These biblical images will be evaluated in greater detail in chapter two of this project.

Characteristics of Christ's Mission Define the Kingdom:

Several Kingdom characteristics and priorities are evidenced through the earthly ministry of Jesus and offer clarity and definition to the nature and purpose of the Kingdom of God. Because the church is the continuation of the incarnational ministry of Jesus in the world, we ought to not only observe but also seek to emulate His example. His sermons are an invaluable resource for a church desiring to adopt a Kingdom of God motif. In his first sermon, immediately following the wilderness temptation and forty-day fast, we read, "From that time on Jesus began to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 4:17) Throughout the Gospels, Jesus repeats this or similar phrases about the in-coming Kingdom; the eschaton has been inaugurated! Luke's gospel fleshes out in more detail how Jesus' first sermon indicated what this authority actually looked like:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, 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. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:18-21)

According to Matthews's gospel, "The people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." (4:16) Christ's authority validates the in-breaking of His kingly rule in the face of oppression,

disease, and poverty; the counter-kingdom has lost its grip, the strong man has been bound!

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, as Christ's earthly ministry begins, his forerunner's role comes to an end. While John the Baptist remained in chains prior to his execution, he asked his disciples to verify that Jesus was the *One* they had anticipated. Jesus' answer to John confirmed the authority of his reign: "Jesus replied, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.'" (Matthew 11:4-5) The victory of the Kingdom was established in power.

Jesus' inaugural address, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), is arguably the closest thing to a blueprint for a Kingdom of God motif that we could hope for. In this sermon he introduced a counter-cultural Kingdom ethic that surpassed the legalistic righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees. Reacting to the high moral demand prescribed in the sermon, some have attempted to "soften the blow" by suggesting that "Jesus was speaking hyperbolically."²⁰ This interpretation is a hard sell in light of Jesus' clarifying statements in the following verses, Matthew 5:19, 7:21, and 7:24. Consequently, "The precise application of his words may not always be easy to determine, but Christians must strive to obey them. This is a heavenly ethic meant to be put in to practice in the midst of a world filled with sin and conflict."²¹

²⁰ VanDrunen, 112.

²¹ Ibid., 112-113.

This is an example of how the Kingdom is both already and not yet. VanDrunnen provides critical instruction concerning the quandary, “*how can I ever live up to these demands?*” He states, “Jesus is not a wise man passing along tips for better living to individuals who might be interested. He is describing the ethics of a kingdom. It is a community’s way of life. The primary question to answer then is not how am I to put the Sermon into practice, but how are we to put it into practice.”²² It would be prudent for any church community desirous of implementing a Kingdom of God economy to adopt this Sermon as their Constitution.

As we will see in the next chapter, Jesus’ character, priorities, preaching, and miracles together with his parables and the study of biblical metaphor amply provide an enlightening rubric for the articulation of a *Basileia tou Theou* (Kingdom of God) motif for the church today.

²² Ibid., 113.

CHAPTER TWO: KINGDOM THEOLOGY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus' Kingdom Priority

Most of Jesus' parables describe or anticipate various aspects of the Kingdom of God. It is evident in the teaching and preaching of Jesus that he talked about the Kingdom more than any other topic, and so should we.¹ Therefore, it is fitting that Biblical scholars and Christian authors through the ages have added countless volumes to a subject that was clearly a priority in Jesus' own teaching and preaching.

The teachings of Jesus and modern Christian scholarship acknowledge the fact that the Kingdom of God is both already and not yet; it was inaugurated with Christ's First Advent and will be consummated at his Second Advent. This conception of the Kingdom is neither new nor contested. George Eldon Ladd articulates this idea as follows: "Jesus said that we must 'receive the kingdom of God' as little children (Mark 10:15). What is received? The Church? Heaven? What is received is God's rule. In order to enter the future realm of the Kingdom, one must submit himself in perfect trust to God's rule here and now."²

While there is no shortage of printed material on the subject, there is discernible incongruity between what has been published and what people in the pew perceive. Among the faithful there is little discussion about the inauguration of the Kingdom, and a little more about the consummation of the Kingdom at the end of the age. Rather, the question of the intermediate state, or what happens to the soul of man during the period

¹ The claim that Jesus had much to say about the Kingdom of God will be substantiated in our examination of the parables and miracles of Christ later in this chapter.

² George Eldon Ladd, *Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God*, Loc. 21.

between death and resurrection seems to have captivated the imagination and speculation of many.

Circumstantial stories and “near-death experiences” are seemingly consulted more often than Scripture with regard to the intermediate state. Recently, the New York Times best seller *Heaven is for Real*³ captured the attention of millions. For many it was confirmation of the popular notion of going to heaven immediately following death, a topic that the New Testament says little about and Jesus said almost nothing about. This does not mean that it should not interest us or even be important to us; it just was not a priority in the teachings of Jesus or the New Testament writers. Consequently, the modern fascination with “going to heaven when I die” has been fueled more by anecdote, tradition, and even Hollywood than by Scripture. Author D. Eric Williams finds this idea disconcerting and offers the following in his published rebuttal of Burpo’s work: “If we begin to accept extra biblical revelation we immediately find ourselves on a slippery slope. Where do we draw the line? At what point do we stop revising our doctrine to accommodate the new revelation?”⁴

While the central purpose of this dissertation is not to articulate a formal position on the matter of the Intermediate state, it is important to establish the idea that the modern preoccupation with *going to heaven when I die* is not the historical position of the church, and has inadvertently replaced the priority of the Kingdom of God in our collective conversation.

³ Todd Burpo, *Heaven Is for Real* (Thomas Nelson, 2010). The story of a four-year-old son of a small-town Nebraska pastor who experienced “heaven” during emergency surgery.

⁴ D. Eric Williams, *Heaven Is For Real, The Book Isn't: An Astounding Refutation Of A Story About A Trip To Heaven And Back* (Lewiston, ID: Comwriter.com Publication, Kindle Edition. 2011) Loc. 295-298.

In his book *Heaven, Hell, and Hades*, Freeman Barton offers a historical overview of Christian beliefs regarding the intermediate state. “From the mid-second century, at least, the intermediate state has been a subject of controversy. What is the nature of this state? Where are the dead, and what condition are they in?”⁵ Barton suggests that the following four main theories have received more or less attention at various times since the beginning of the church.

Materialistic View: This position maintains that man is solely a material being and that at death he ceases to exist at all except in the mind of God who will recreate him from memory at the resurrection. This belief was popular during the sixteenth century among the Anabaptists, but has never been widely held within orthodoxy.⁶ Millard Erickson rejects this hypothesis, stating, “How can the very same molecules come together to form the post resurrection person? The molecules constituting the pre-death person may well have been destroyed, have formed new compounds, or even have been part of someone else’s body. In this connection, cremation presents a particularly difficult problem”⁷ Although historically this position has not been taken seriously, the scientific breakthrough of the molecular structure of DNA (The blueprint for life), could arguably introduce an interesting counter to Erickson’s (and many others’) reluctance to entertain the materialistic view.

⁵ Freeman Barton, *Heaven, Hell, and Hades: A Historical and Theological Survey of Personal Eschatology* (Lenox, MA: Henceforth Publications, 1990), 30-31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), 1183.

Unconscious View: The unconscious view holds that the deceased remain in a sleep-like state until the resurrection. When the Second Advent occurs, both the wicked and the righteous alike will be raised, judged, and be consigned to their eternal destiny.⁸

Throughout history, various individuals and movements have espoused the unconscious view. Most recently, George Eldon Ladd came close to this idea when arguing against the “essentially Greek view that final salvation occurs when we die and go to heaven to be with the Lord.”⁹ While Ladd is hesitant to affirm unconsciousness of the intermediate state, he did go on to say “Paul says nothing about the condition of the dead in Christ or what kind of existence they have.”¹⁰

Common objections to this position include the Apostle Paul’s comments in 2 Corinthians 5:6-8 concerning absence from the body; Jesus’ conversation recorded in Luke chapter 23 with the thief on the cross; and the Lord’s Parable of the Rich man and Lazarus in Luke 19 (This parable will be discussed below).

Traditional View: Barton refers to this view as traditional because of the fact that historically it has been the position most commonly held among Orthodox Christians.

This view suggests that the souls of the departed exist in a compartmentalized subterranean locality.¹¹ C. Paul Gray, a proponent of the traditional position, states:

At death the righteous go immediately into the presence of the Lord...they are with Christ and are happy and at rest. Yet this is not the final state of believers, for after the resurrection and the final judgment the righteous enter in the joys of a new heaven and a new earth. As to the fate of the

⁸ Barton, 34.

⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 111.

¹⁰ Ibid., 112.

¹¹ Barton, 33.

wicked, at death they are banished from the presence of the Lord in Hades and are in a state of conscious suffering and unrest. However, Hades is not their final state, for they too will be resurrected, but only to be consigned to a place of everlasting shame and contempt at the last judgment.¹²

The Roman Catholic variation is a subcategory of the traditional view. Since the Middle Ages, Roman Catholics have held that there are several departments associated with the intermediate state:

Limbus Patrum, where the souls of Pre-Christian saints remained until Christ released them at his descent into Hades following his crucifixion. Limbus Infantum, the receptacle of the souls of unbaptized children; Hell, where impenitent sinners and wicked angels suffer eternally; Heaven, where a few saints go immediately at death and where other church members go upon receiving the requisite perfection in Purgatory, and Purgatory, the residence of all members of the Church who are not yet perfect.¹³

Modern View: This interpretation seems to have gained popularity among the faithful in recent years, but can be traced as far back as the second century. The belief is that upon the death of the body, the soul goes immediately to the place of its final destiny. The souls of the righteous are in heaven enjoying the presence of God; the souls of the wicked are suffering the tortures of hell. Dr. Barton proposes that the idea that men's souls go immediately to heaven or hell came into prominence at the time of the Reformation as a sort of reaction against Romanist views. However, this popular concept did not become dominant until modern times.¹⁴

¹² Richard Shelley Taylor, J. Kenneth Grider, and Willard H. Taylor. Gray, C. Paul *Beacon Dictionary of Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1983), 290.

¹³ Barton, 33.

¹⁴ Ibid.

The modern view is incompatible with the teachings of Christ. According to John 3:13, Jesus once claimed, “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.”

Jesus’ View: When we examine the parables of Jesus it is self-evident that his passion and priority was the Kingdom of God and not the popular modern notion of dying and going to heaven. Again, the purpose of this dissertation is not to add to the debate regarding the intermediate state, but to point out that the modern fixation with the intermediate state does not cohere with the priorities of Jesus and should not be confused or equated with, but rather subordinated to, his view of the Kingdom.

The Lord’s parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 is the only parable that might possibly be construed as relating to the topic of the intermediate and or final state. This, in fact, is one of the primary proof texts used to support both the modern and traditional views regarding this matter. Before examining what Jesus had to say about the Kingdom of God in his parabolic teaching, it is important to wrestle with the one parable that could possibly contradict the claim that he had little to say about this subject.

The verses prior to and leading up to this parable demonstrate that Jesus was in the midst of a series of encounters with the Pharisees and his discussion centered on the proper use and management of money and did not express Jesus’ view of personal or cosmic eschatology. According to verse 14, “The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.” Consequently, he shared this parable with them, portraying the greed of the Pharisees, who viewed themselves as privileged and even

avored by God. They looked down on the poor and the needy, despising them and treating them as if they were deserving of their fate.

Clarence Hewitt proposed a similar interpretation, “The subject of the future life was not under discussion. To the contrary, an important problem of present ethical significance was engaging the minds of Christ and those who heard him... the question was that of the right use of wealth.”¹⁵ The main point of Jesus’ story is that despite the many opportunities the Pharisees were afforded, they continually rejected them. Ultimately this was about stewardship, the management of money, and opportunities.

If Jesus had been teaching on the question of the intermediate or final state of saints and sinners, then according to this story, rich people go to hell and poor people go to heaven. The rich man was punished in eternity for failing to offer a beggar scraps from his table, while the poor beggar was rewarded in heaven and granted eternal life because of his impoverished lifestyle on earth. Such an implied soteriology would be inconsistent with and contradictory to New Testament teaching on this matter.

Furthermore, this explanation assumes that souls in heaven will be able to see and communicate with those tormented in hell. According to William Barclay, many Jews and early Christians believed that Paradise could be seen from hell and vice-versa. “It is a grim thought that part of heaven’s joy was to watch the sufferings of the sinner in hell.”¹⁶

For Bible students’ eager to build support from the teachings of Jesus for their view on the intermediate state, this parable is almost too tempting to resist. However, as Walter Liefeld reasons,

¹⁵ Clarence H. Hewitt, *What Does the Future Hold?* (Charlotte, NC: Advent Christian Publications, 1970), 146.

¹⁶ Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus*, 93-94.

The expositor must keep in mind that one cannot build an eschatology on it. To do that will result in an anachronism; for though Revelation 20:14 places the throwing of death and Hades into the lake of fire at the end of history (the second death), in this story the rich man is already in a torment of fire, in his body, while his brothers are still living.¹⁷

While a minority position maintains that this story is not a parable but a historical account of a literal event, even those who regard the eschatological components as literal generally accept it as a parable. The passage does not offer a strong proof text for the Modern view of the intermediate state:

If the passage is a parable, we must exercise caution when it comes to basing a doctrine upon it, especially a doctrine which, if true, would contradict the rest of Scripture. It is a principle of interpretation that an important doctrine may not be proved from a parable.¹⁸

William Smith seemingly would concur with this interpretive principle and adds to the debate that accounts of this story are replete in extra biblical sources: “It is impossible to ground the proof of an important theological doctrine on a passage which confessedly abounds in Jewish metaphors.”¹⁹

Jesus’ Kingdom Parables

As previously noted, the topic of the Kingdom was one of the most common themes in the parables of Jesus. It is often assumed that Jesus spoke in parables to bring clarity and simplicity to his teaching: to make his instruction accessible. However, the parables were a sort of “double-edged sword,” sometimes used to make truth obvious and

¹⁷ Frank E. Gaebelin, J. Douglas D., D. Carson A., Walter Wessel W., and Walter Liefeld L., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: With the New International Version of the Holy Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1984), 991.

¹⁸ Hewitt, 146.

¹⁹ William Smith, Horatio B. Hackett, and Ezra Abbot. *Dr. William Smith's Dictionary of the Bible: Comprising Its Antiquities, Biography, Geography and Natural History* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1876), 1038.

other times to obscure it (Matthew 13:13). “A parable revealed truth to those accepting and appreciating it, concealing it from those resenting and abusing it.”²⁰ Leonard Sweet explains it as follows:

Jesus spoke in parables so that not everyone would ‘get it.’ He unveiled the mystery only a tad, letting glimpses of truth escape. But only if you wanted to get it was Jesus willing to explain his parables and to reveal the ‘mysteries of the kingdom of heaven’, and then he was quite eager to help. But he was not going to throw pearls before swine.²¹

Historically, parables have at times been mistakenly interpreted as allegories.

While an allegory may have several meanings, a parable is a short story that communicates one main point. Borrowing from one of Dr. Leonard Sweet’s analogies, interpreting parables is more like eating apples than oranges.

You eat an apple whole. You pick it up and bite into it without first altering it. Depending on how big your mouth is, you can taste the whole organism: skin, meat, core, seeds. Eating an apple is an organic, holistic experience. It involves a unified approach to and account of the apple. But what of the orange? You don’t eat an orange until after you have manipulated it. It has to be taken apart. You peel it, separate the skin, section it, and sometimes even remove the meat from the membranes.²²

The temptation to overanalyze when mining a parable for truths can sometimes lead to proof texting and faulty conclusions “You miss those insights and connections when you piece out the Bible as if you were separating an orange.”²³

Jesus was a master storyteller. He communicated profound truths in culturally relevant and creative ways. He did not simply feature clever stories as he taught, he

²⁰ Herbert Lockyer, *All the Parables of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 179.

²¹ Leonard Sweet, *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There* (David C. Cook, Kindle Edition, 2010), Loc. 1445-1448.

²² Leonard Sweet, *Viral: How Social Networking Is Poised to Ignite Revival* (Random House, Inc. Kindle Edition, 2012), Loc.140.

²³ *Ibid.*, 140.

communicated via story. Ralph Lewis said, “Jesus didn’t use such stories merely as teasers, light introductions to get his hearers listening for what he really wanted to say. They weren’t just illustrations of his point; they *were* the point.”²⁴ Consequently, Jesus told a lot of parables. There is no consensus on how many of Jesus’ stories ought to be classified as parables: “between thirty-one and sixty-five...(depending on who’s counting). Scholars cannot agree whether some are parables or not. But most will admit that at least one-third of Jesus’ teachings are parables. They were His brand signature.”²⁵

As was previously discussed, none of Jesus parables relating to the Kingdom dealt with the popular concept of the intermediate state or “dying and going to heaven.” Rather, they reflected on some aspect of the Already/Not Yet Kingdom of God. For our purposes we will consider three categories addressed in the Kingdom parables:

- The Inaugurated Kingdom
- The Consummated Kingdom
- The Counter Kingdom

Some of the parables focus specifically on one of these classifications; others overlap. Each one is instructive as we move toward a Kingdom motif for the twenty-first-century church, especially as we give particular attention to the Kingdom as Christ’s authority and rulership, resisting the temptation to define the Kingdom in the traditional language of territory or domain. The work of George Eldon Ladd is especially valuable when seeking to articulate an inaugurated Kingdom theology. He reminds us “the primary meaning of both the Hebrew word *Malkuth* in the Old Testament and of the Greek word *Basileia* in the New Testament is the rank, authority and sovereignty

²⁴ Ralph L. Lewis and Gregg Lewis, *Learning to Preach like Jesus* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), 26.

²⁵ Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola, *Jesus: A Theography* (Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition. 2012), Loc. 192.

exercised by a king...When this is once realized, we can go through the New Testament and find passage after passage where this meaning is evident, where the Kingdom is not a realm or a people but God's reign."²⁶

Inaugurated Kingdom: Jesus told twin parables, back to back: the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price, through which he demonstrated the inestimable worth of the Kingdom. They are recorded in Matthew 13:44-46 and are not repeated anywhere else.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

“These two parables constitute together but one text and teach the same general lesson, namely, the incomparable worth and the ultimate triumph of the Kingdom of God.”²⁷ William Barclay succinctly states the meaning as follows: “The one point of the parable is the finding of treasure and the sacrificing of everything for it; just so a man should sacrifice everything for the Kingdom of God.”²⁸

In these parables, the reign of God is celebrated as something of infinite value and deserving of one's entire devotion and consecration. This Kingdom theology has implications that will revolutionize the church. No longer functioning as a democracy where “membership has its privileges,” members willingly subordinate their will and

²⁶ Ladd, *Gospel of the Kingdom*, 19.

²⁷ Lockyer, *All the Parables of the Bible*, 197.

²⁸ Barclay, 68-69.

preferences entirely to his. This is a Kingdom theology that is truly Christocentric; Christ himself the Kingdom, the *autobasileia*. He alone is worthy of our reckless abandon.

Barclay proposes the following as a noteworthy difference between the twin parables. “It was apparently by the sheerest chance that the man found the hidden treasure. But it was at the end of a long search that the merchant found the pearl.”²⁹ The church observes from these parables that both approaches are appropriate. Some will come seeking after the Kingdom and others will seemingly stumble across it.

Kennon Callahan describes these two methodologies for presenting the Kingly reign of Christ.³⁰ The first model follows the example of the Good Shepherd who left the ninety-nine safe sheep in the pasture while launching an all-out search for the one lost sheep (Luke 15). The second example is provided by the Shepherdess Little Bo Peep who waits for the lost sheep to come home, “wagging their tails behind them.” These two methodologies might be classified as “Go and Tell” versus “Come and See.” More recently, it has become fashionable to label these approaches as incarnational versus attractional. According to the parables of the treasure in the field and the merchant and the pearl, both are legitimate paths to the Kingdom.

In Matthew 22:1-14, Jesus tells the parable of the Marriage Feast and Garment. For some, this metaphor immediately conjures up imagery of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb and the consummation of the Kingdom of God. However, Jesus is again talking about the inaugurated Kingdom, a present-tense experience and relationship with him. The King in the story represents the Heavenly Father who sent His son to establish his

²⁹ Ibid., 73.

³⁰ Kennon L. Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 22.

earthly Kingdom. The Kingly reign of Christ is illustrated as a great banquet celebration. Barclay observes the incongruity between Jesus' description of his reign and how the church often unintentionally portrays it.

To enter the Kingdom was as joyous a thing as to go to a banquet. It would have been well if Christians had always remembered that. Too often the charge against Christianity has been that it took all the light, the zest, the joy out of life. Men have too often seen Christianity as that which made them do all the things they did not want to do and abandon all the things they would have like to do.³¹

A Biblical Kingdom theology, particularly as it relates to the “already” aspect of the Kingdom, will serve as a corrective for this mentality. Someone said, “We are dying to leave what Christ died to save.” The sentiment is effectively captured in the lyrics of an early-twentieth-century hymn:

This world is not my home I'm just a passing through
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue
The angels beckon me from Heaven's open door
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.³²

However, in this parable, our world is where the party begins. Jesus came to his own, the religious people of his day, and invited them to participate in his long-awaited arrival. He came to establish his earthly reign and those who were invited to the celebration refused to come. After the third invitation, the host of the banquet expanded his guest list.

According to Barclay:

³¹ Barclay, 152.

³² “Pages.” Hymnstudiesblog.com (accessed October 11, 2013). <http://hymnstudiesblog.wordpress.com/>. “The text and the tune (I’m Just a Passing Through) are both of unknown origin. Sometimes they are attributed to Albert Edward Brumley (1905-1977). Brumley made what is undoubtedly the most popular arrangement of the song for his 1937 book *Radio Favorites*. However, research has shown that the first appearance of the song seems to have been in the 1919 *Joyful Meeting in Glory No. 1*, edited by Bertha Davis and published by C. Miller of Mt. Sterling, KY. It is believed by many to have come from the southern African-American spiritual tradition. Another arrangement was made by Jesse R. Baxter Jr. (1887-1960). It was published in the 1946 *Sentimental Songs* by the Stamps-Baxter Music and Printing Co. (although Baxter’s version seems to be just a rehashing of Brumley’s).”

The procedure may seem strange to us but in Palestine it was normal. If a man purposed to hold a banquet he fixed the day ahead but not the exact hour. When the day came the more honored guests were personally summoned by servants sent to fetch them. Those not so summoned divided themselves into two classes. Those who had no great opinion of their own importance were there early, humbly grateful for the invitation and determined not to miss it; those who had a good opinion of themselves waited until the last minute, or actually came late, to make an entry and let everyone see that they were there.³³

Those included on the expanded guest list probably represented Gentiles and all kinds of sinners – “the good and the bad.” The servants were ordered to gather as many as were willing to come in order that the banquet would be full.

Jesus continues this story by introducing another element of the inaugurated Kingdom: many are invited but few are chosen. Those who declined the invitation were immediately excluded, and even some who accepted the invitation were disqualified. The latter are represented in the parable by a man who refused to wear the wedding clothes that were provided for him. “The wedding garment is essentially a habit of holiness and righteousness...how many there are who want a place in the Church without regeneration and obedience, or salvation. The man without the wedding garment seems to say, I am my own master, and I shall work my own way to heaven.”³⁴ We become citizens of the Kingdom of God when we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. We are not our own, we have been bought with a price. The King/Kingdom is a gift of grace received by faith.

Luke records in his gospel (14:16-24) a very similar story with a parallel interpretation. Consequently, many expositors have confused them as the same story told by two authors. Herbert Lockyer argues, however, “Matthew’s marriage feast was a parable uttered in the Temple and Luke’s great supper was given at a meal in the house of

³³ Barclay, 151.

³⁴ Lockyer, 232.

a Pharisee. Both parables belong to different periods of Christ's ministry. Jesus often repeated the same material on different occasions."³⁵ This parable, like its twin in Matthew, describes the in-breaking of the inaugurated Kingdom. It too is described as a festive celebration and, similarly, many of the invited guests refused to participate. The master of the banquet demanded that his servants:

Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.' Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.' (Luke 14:21-23)

There are two distinct features in this story that must be observed. First, there is the "element of righteous indignation."³⁶ The host of this banquet was infuriated by the apparent apathy of the invited guests. The chorus of a fun little song based on this passage paraphrases the story well:

I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now
I have married a wife; I have bought me a cow.
I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum!
Pray hold me excused, I cannot come.³⁷

"If in the master of the house being angry we have a reminder of God's displeasure over those who offer insult rather than gratitude, then how solemnized we ought to be over the fearfulness of falling into the hands of a living God."³⁸

In this parable, as in the one recorded by Matthew, it was his own people who rejected his Kingdom, and so it was offered to others. John 1:11-13 says it so well: "He

³⁵ Ibid., 228.

³⁶ Ibid., 278.

³⁷ Medical Mission Sisters, Philadelphia, PA. Vanguard Music Corp.

³⁸ Lockyer, 278.

came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

The second distinct feature of this parable is observed in the unmistakable messianic reference to “the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.”(vs. 21) This is a sign of the arrival of the sovereign reign of God in Christ. Those who receive and enter the Kingdom of God find provision, healing, and wholeness. Jesus promised his disciples and all who would be called upon to carry on his incarnational ministry, “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these.” (John 14:12a) This point will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter when we consider the miracles of the Kingdom.

The parable of the sower is repeated in all three of the synoptic gospels (Matthew 13:3-8; Mark 4:4-8; Luke 8:5-8). In the story, a farmer spreads seed in what appears to be a random fashion. It falls on various terrains: a walking path, a rocky place, among the thorns, and on good, fertile soil. It is nearly universally understood that the act of spreading the seed is a metaphor for proclaiming the gospel of the Kingdom. “The parable means that just as every Palestinian sower does his work in spite of many frustrations, so the kingdom makes its way in spite of many difficulties. It will be established in time, with a sure and glorious harvest, but only after much loss.”³⁹ In the words of a door-to-door salesman, “some will, some won’t, so what.” However, in the case of this parable, the stakes are too high for such a callous attitude.

³⁹ Merrill C. Tenney and Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin. Vol. 9. John/Acts (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 305.

Using this passage as a proof text for contemporary evangelism, Pastor Rick

Warren proposes the following logical question:

Wouldn't it be great if you knew what the good soil was and sowed all your seed there? Why waste seed, time, effort, energy and money? It's God's job to prepare the soil. It's our job to sow the seed. You don't do the soil preparation. God uses all kinds of sovereign things like divorce, crises, death, economic problems, government shutdowns, being out-of-work, a new baby, and a new job to prepare the soil. But God uses you to sow.⁴⁰

In the parable, Jesus is the original "sower." However, he was also the seed sown.

As Lockyer said, "the Word of God is the seed, and Christ came as the Word of God (John 1:1) He Himself is the seed."⁴¹ He counters the question "how could Jesus be both the seed and the sower?" as follows, "Nor is there any inconsistency in representing Christ as the Seed while He was in the first instance also the Sower. Most certainly He preached the Saviour, and also was the Saviour whom He preached."⁴² This claim is consistent with a similar statement by Sweet and Viola: "Jesus Himself becomes the Word. In the defining parable of the sower, we are to tend the Word of YHWH, the seed of the ground, and to plant it everywhere. You never know where it will take. Jesus is the Torah seed in the flesh. This is one of the 'mysteries of the kingdom,' Jesus reveals."⁴³

As previously affirmed, Jesus is the Kingdom of God; he himself is the *autobasileia*. He came to proclaim and establish his kingdom and because of his sinless life, suffering, sacrificial death, and bodily resurrection he could say, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). His Kingdom has been

⁴⁰ Rick Warren, "Why Evangelism Should Focus On Receptive People." Pastors.com. <http://pastors.com/why-evangelism-should-focus-on-receptive-people/> (accessed October 12, 2013).

⁴¹ Lockyer, 177.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Sweet and Viola, 81.

launched in power, but it is not an irresistible Kingdom. Ladd reminds us of another aspect of this parable:

The mystery of the Kingdom is this: The Kingdom of God is here but not with irresistible power. The Kingdom of God has come, but it is not like a stone grinding an image to powder. It is not now destroying wickedness. On the contrary, it is like a man sowing seed. It does not force itself upon men. Some, like the good soil, receive it; but there are many others who do not receive it.⁴⁴

Lockyer cautions the reader, “Let us then call it the Parable of the Soils, and understand that these soils are different states of heart and their reaction to the Gospel.”⁴⁵

Each of the parables evaluated thus far have been devoted to the theme of the inaugurated Kingdom of God, that which was introduced at the First Advent and will continue until the Second Advent. In the story of the ten virgins, Jesus anticipates the Second Coming, and the consummation of the Kingdom in the age to come. The essence of the parable is that those who have received the Kingdom (the authority, reign, and rule of God) must remain perpetually prepared for the Lord’s return. No one knows when he will come again (Matthew 24:36, Mark 13:32), and only those who are ready at his appearing will be included in the consummation of the Kingdom of God.

Many across the ages have treated the topic of prophecy and specifically the matter of the Second Coming of Christ as a hobby. While a careful consideration of the teachings of Jesus concerning this subject is of great importance, Jesus reminded us that “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.” (Acts 1:7) “Jesus definitely discouraged any attempt to be too curious about the matter, saying that no one could know the day or hour. He counseled instead an attitude of

⁴⁴ Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, 56.

⁴⁵ Lockyer, 177.

watchfulness and constant readiness.”⁴⁶ The thesis of this parable concerning the consummation of the Kingdom of God serves as a reminder to keep working while we are waiting, and to remember what we are anticipating while we are working. That this parable refers to the consummation of the Kingdom is rarely contested, and its interpretation is hardly ambiguous. In verse 13 the words of Jesus clearly specified, “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

There are several Parables that address both the inauguration and the consummation of the Kingdom of God in the same pericope. For example, in Matthew 13:47-50 Jesus compared the Kingdom of Heaven to a fisherman’s net. While the emphasis is on the end of the age and the final judgment, there is also an allusion to the inaugurated Kingdom, the catching of all kinds of fish. Jesus distinguishes between good fish and bad fish; the good are kept the bad are thrown away (Judgment at the end of the age). “By good fish, we are to understand those that were sound and salable, and spiritually represent those who belong to the good Lord, and who, in turn, are good and do good. By the bad fish, we can visualize putrid, dead fish being corrupt they were unfit for food. Being offensive and worthless, they were cast away.”⁴⁷

Clearly the focus here is on the consummation of the Kingdom and the Day of Judgment. However we are also reminded that during the church age, the inaugurated reign of Christ, there are both “good and bad” members of the visible church. What is evident here (as well as in the parable of the “Wheat and the Tares” which will be discussed later in this chapter) is that there are two “churches” during the inaugurated reign: one visible and one invisible. However, when the Kingdom of God is

⁴⁶ Clarence H. Hewitt, *Faith For Today* (Boston, MA: The Warren Press, 1941), 176

⁴⁷ Lockyer, 207.

consummated at the Second Coming of Christ there will be one church. Presently the visible church includes members who “may be religious yet not regenerated, baptized yet never washed in the blood of Christ: professors yet not possessors.”⁴⁸ In the age to come after the separation of the “good fish from the bad fish” the true, invisible church will be eternally united with the King of Kings.

In Mark 4:26-29 the Kingdom is compared to growing seed. Jesus demonstrated in this metaphor the progression of the Kingdom. The inaugurated kingdom is introduced by the sowing of seed and its progress is represented as germination, maturation and finally, consummation of the Kingdom, prefigured in the image of the harvest. In this symbolism, both the inauguration and consummation of His Kingdom are anticipated.

In verse 28 Jesus said, “All by itself the soil produces grain.” This critical piece serves as a corrective for the widespread notion, which depicts the Kingdom as the work of the church. If the Kingdom of God is the dominion of Jesus Christ, the church does not and cannot “build” it; He is both King and Kingdom. One of the unique features of this particular Kingdom parable is the instructive phrase, “all by itself.” According to author Christian Schwarz, scientists call this concept the biotic principle. “Ecologists define it as the inherent capacity of an organism or species to reproduce and survive.”⁴⁹ Schwarz continues, “The same is true for church development, we should not attempt to manufacture church growth, but rather to release the biotic potential which God has put into every church. It is our task to minimize the obstacles to growth, the environmental

⁴⁸ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁹ Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 10.

resistance both inside and outside the church...then church growth can happen ‘all by itself.’”⁵⁰

So then, what does this mean for the church during the inaugurated reign? Should we assume a deterministic theology like that exhibited in the admonition to young William Carey, “Sit down young man; when God wants to evangelize the heathen, He will do it without your help.”⁵¹ Schwarz suggests that the Parable of the growing seed as recorded in Mark 4:26-29,

“Clearly shows what people can and should do, and what they cannot do. They should sow and harvest, they may sleep and rise. What they cannot ever do is this: they cannot bring forth the fruit. In the text, we find the mysterious description of the earth producing fruit by itself. Most commentators agree that this ‘by itself’ is the key for understanding this parable...Christians, however, know even though it cannot be proven empirically – that the fruit that develops seemingly all by itself is in reality, a work of God. The ‘automatism’ is really a theomatism.”⁵²

Paul sums this thesis up quite succinctly in 1 Corinthians 3:6, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.”

It seems that religious people of all ages have struggled with the meaning, stages and timing of the Kingdom of God. Jesus taught the Parable of the Pounds (Luke 19:11-27) in the presence of those who were of the opinion that the earthly reign of the Messiah/King was imminent. In this context, Jesus told a story about a nobleman who “went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return.” (Vs. 12) Again Ladd provides valuable insight,

⁵⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁵¹ Ralph D. Winter, Steven Hawthorne C., Darrell Dorr R., D. Graham Bruce., and Bruce Koch A. *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: Reader* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 75.

⁵² Schwarz, 12.

“The nobleman did not go away to get a realm, an area over which to rule. The realm over which he wanted to reign was at hand. The territory over which he was to rule was this place he left. The problem was that he was no king. He needed authority, the right to rule. He went off to get a ‘kingdom,’ i.e., kingship, authority.”⁵³

According to Lockyer, Jesus was alluding to “His approaching departure from the earth, the trial-time between His ascension and His return, the necessity of fidelity on the part of His servants during His absence, and the hostility of His rejecters.”⁵⁴ Jesus himself is the nobleman who came from Heaven to earth, lived a sinless life, was falsely accused, arrested, tried, convicted, put to death and resurrected on the third day. He then ascended to the Father, and consequently was given all authority on heaven and earth. “Presently, His Kingdom is an invisible one and consists in the execution of the great plan of redemption translating those in sin’s bondage into His Kingdom of light and liberty.”⁵⁵ This parable foresees both the inauguration of the Kingdom of God and predicts the Second Advent when it will finally be consummated. In the interim “the pounds represent the Gospel with all its privileges conferred alike on all those saved by grace.”⁵⁶

There is an interesting plot twist at the end of the parable. At the consummation of the Kingdom, there will be a day of judgment. The servant who “Kept it (the pound) laid away in a piece of cloth” (vs. 20) signifies those who are guilty of the sin of omission. “Here is where good people often err gravely, for there is a sin in not doing. Our churches

⁵³ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵⁴ Lockyer, 306.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 307.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 308.

are full of those guilty of this sin. They seem to have no desire to serve the Saviour. They have the pound to trade, but it is buried in a napkin.”⁵⁷

This is why it is imperative that we develop a biblical Kingdom of God theology for the 21st century church. One that will function as a corrective for the all too common misperception that “Kingdom” refers primarily to a future reward being “kept away” for those who have given assent to a particular creed or belief.

In the parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Matthew 13:24-30), both the present reign of Christ and the consummation of the Kingdom at the end of the age are in view. The Wheat symbolizes the debut of the inaugurated Kingdom. “The Son of Man, as the Sower or Householder sows only good seed: lives transformed by, and embodying the word of truth.”⁵⁸ According to the parable, when the wheat had sprouted, weeds also appeared (26). The Sower determined that “an enemy did this” (28). The weeds metaphorically introduce yet another Kingdom, or “counter-kingdom.” The enemy is a deceiver who sows a replication, a toxic weed intended to wreck havoc in God’s field. “The tares were a weed called bearded darnel which in its early stages was so like wheat that it was next to impossible to distinguish them. In fact, before it headed out not even the wisest farmer could tell one from the other. After it had headed out the difference was clear.”⁵⁹ The enemy is clever but he is not creative. He mimics that which is authentic and for a time his cunning copies are deceptive. Eventually, that which is genuine is set apart from the artificial. By this time however, the roots have become so inextricably bound together that “while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with

⁵⁷ Ibid., 309.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 182.

⁵⁹ Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus*, 38.

them” (30). Consequently, the farmer patiently waits until harvest; separates the wheat from the darnel, which by this time has matured and has developed distinctive visual characteristics making the separation possible. The wheat is stored and the darnel is destroyed. This element of the parable anticipates the end of the age and the consummation of the eternal Kingdom of God.

In the meantime, we are reminded that the counter-kingdom poses a real threat. The Apostle Paul was keenly aware of this peril and warned, “For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve” (2 Corinthians 11:13-15). Jesus had plenty to say about the counter-kingdom, which is the subject of the concluding parables under consideration.

“Again he asked, “What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough” (Luke 13:20-21). This parable is identical to Matthews’s version, (13:33). The interpretation of this parable along with its twin, the mustard seed, is not immediately apparent. On the surface it would seem that the Lord is predicting the expanse and influence of his reign on earth. This popular analysis is held by many including R. C. H. Lenski who believes it shows that “the gospel cannot but succeed, and the one work of the church is to preach, teach, and spread it in the world. The parable teaches faith, patience, hope and joy.”⁶⁰ John Jefferson Davis agrees with this optimistic explanation, and lumping this together with the parable of the impressive growth of the mustard seed

⁶⁰ Lenski, R. C. H., *The Interpretation at St. Luke’s Gospel* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg 1946), 745.

adds, “the parables of the leaven and the mustard seed describe the nature and the remarkable extent of the growth of the kingdom.”⁶¹

The primary difficulty that some have with this reading is that throughout the Old and New Testaments, yeast is consistently used synonymously with evil influence. If Jesus intended for this image to demonstrate the progressive effect of his inaugurated Kingdom it would arguably be the only instance in all of Scripture where this symbol is used to illustrate something positive, and would contradict historical and traditional Hebrew thought.

Consequently, Barclay suggests perhaps the parable is referring to the “disturbing influence of Christianity.”⁶² True Christianity is by nature revolutionary and divisive. It introduces radical change, a departure from the status quo and is rarely welcomed. This rendering maintains the positive expansion of the Kingdom view while preserving the historic Hebrew perspective regarding leaven.

Lockyer argues that such a view does not go far enough in its characterization of the evil influence symbolized by the yeast. “Leaven is invariably used to signify that which is bad, corrupt, unsound, how can it mean otherwise in the parable we are now considering? The typical meaning of leaven here must be in full harmony with its usage elsewhere in Scripture.”⁶³

Lockyer is convinced that the yeast in the parable represents the counter-kingdom. The dough represents the Kingdom of God; the yeast was mixed in and introduced into

⁶¹ John Jefferson Davis, *Christ's Victorious Kingdom: Postmillennialism Reconsidered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), 52.

⁶² Barclay, 61.

⁶³ Lockyer, 190.

the batch, like a foreign invasion. “The leaven was hidden in the meal, and as a type of evil, represents the way in which Satan’s subtle forces militate against the truth. Leaven is uniformly symbolic of that which disintegrates, breaks up, corrupts.”⁶⁴ According to this interpretation of the Parable, Jesus is predicting the infiltration of enemy forces, which seek to pervert and subvert Gods glorious objective.

In a similar vein, the parable of the mustard seed has been broadly taken to imply the inspirational idea, “do not despise small beginnings.” Many motivational sermons have been preached on the theme of the mustard seeds impressive progress despite its humble beginnings. Trench’s view is consistent with an optimistic interpretation, “both parables describe the small and insignificant beginnings, the gradual progress and the final marvelous increase of the church.”⁶⁵ This may in fact be a valid interpretation or at least a useful lesson. But, is this really what Jesus intended for his hearers to understand in his original context? Again Lockyer challenges the common or familiar interpretation: “What must not be forgotten is the fact that all the parables of Matthew 13 have to do with our age, and that by them our Lord was not teaching the complete and ultimate success of His Kingdom in this age which extends from His first advent right over to His second advent to earth.”⁶⁶

Similarly, many, if not most commentators regard the birds of the air in the twin parable of the mustard seed as representative of men and nations. Lockyer argues that this reading is inconsistent. “By comparing Scripture with Scripture we find that the birds, or

⁶⁴ Ibid., 190.

⁶⁵ Richard Chenevix Trench, *Notes on the Parables of Our Lord* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1948), 88.

⁶⁶ Lockyer, 184.

fowls, of the air symbolize Satan and his subtle forces. Used in a former parable in this sense, they must have the same significance in this parable.”⁶⁷

If this rendering is correct, then the parables of the Leaven and the Mustard Seed demonstrate that the Kingdom of God in this world is not an uncontested Kingdom. The enemy has launched an assault, a counter attack against Christ’s authority. While he is a defeated foe, he “prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Although his ultimate fate is sealed, until the final reign of Christ is consummated, he will make every effort to infiltrate the Kingdom of God sowing seeds of dissention and destruction.

Jesus’ Kingdom Miracles

Not unlike the synoptic Gospels, the book of John is replete with symbolism and metaphor; however, the fourth Gospel is unlike the others in that it does not contain extended parables. It is said, “the miracles of Jesus were His parables and teachings in action.”⁶⁸ The Lord’s miraculous performances were not merely crowd pleasers, nor were they random acts of kindness; rather, they were intentional and purposeful signs of the Kingdom. “Jesus’ miraculous demonstration of the kingdom of God cannot be separated from His proclamation of the kingdom. Therefore, like the parables and the other verbal means of communicating the kingdom, miracles have a revelatory function in the ministry of Jesus.”⁶⁹ John Wimber said, “Jesus’ signs and wonders were his calling card,

⁶⁷ Ibid., 187.

⁶⁸ Sweet and Viola, 170.

⁶⁹ Mark Saucy, “Miracles and Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153, no. 611 (1996): 281-307. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 24, 2013)

one of the proofs that the kingdom of God had come.”⁷⁰ And according to Miles Monroe, “The nature of Jesus’ proclamation was not just in the words He spoke. It was demonstrated in the power emanating from His life. The power of the Kingdom was demonstrated through Jesus by the miracles, signs, and wonders He performed.”⁷¹

Everett Harrison distinguishes between three Greek terms associated with miracles.

The first word ‘miracle’ (*dynamis*), means a mighty work. The second word ‘wonder’, (*teras*), means a marvel, something that makes its appeal to the senses. The third, ‘sign’ (*semeion*), points to a spiritual truth of which the miracle is the outward expression...Of these three terms, the third is the most important in relation to Jesus’ mission. In its aspect as a sign, a miracle was a kind of acted parable, whose value lay in its correspondence with the spiritual lesson it was intended to convey.⁷²

Merrill C. Tenney explains the term most often associated with Christ’s miracles as follows, “Within the Gospel of John *semeion* is used seventeen times and in the American Standard Version is uniformly translated ‘sign’...the author states explicitly that the purpose of his writing is expressed through these signs and that he has selected seven from a much larger number known to him as the core of the discussion of Jesus’ words and works.”⁷³ Sweet and Viola said,

We could easily write a separate book expounding the seven signs of John’s gospel, but here’s a brief survey: 1. Turning water into wine—demonstrates how eternal life reverses human failure and removes mortal shame. 2. The healing of the nobleman’s son— demonstrates how eternal

⁷⁰ John Wimber, *Power Evangelism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 91.

⁷¹ Munroe, 162.

⁷² Everett F. Harrison, *A Short Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing CO., 2001), 112.

⁷³ Merrill Chapin Tenney, “Topics from the Gospel of John,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132, no. 526 (1975): 145-160. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 24, 2013), 146.

life is unlimited by space, time, and matter. 3. The healing of the palsied man at the pool of Bethesda— demonstrates how eternal life delivers us from the bondage to sin and death. 4. The feeding of the five thousand— demonstrates how eternal life is always sufficient and can never be exhausted. 5. Jesus walking on water— demonstrates how eternal life transcends and is victorious over the force of nature. 6. The healing of the man who was born blind— demonstrates how eternal life gives spiritual sight. 7. The raising of Lazarus from the dead— demonstrates how eternal life overcomes death in all of its degrees.⁷⁴

For the purposes of this project and specifically the subject of *Jesus' Kingdom Miracles*, we will review the seven signs as recorded in the fourth gospel and finally, evaluate one more sign not addressed by John, but unequivocally undertaken in the synoptic gospels.

Turning water into wine – (John 2:1-11) “The failure of the supply of wine, which was an embarrassment to the host and an insult to the guests, provided the opportunity for Christ’s first miracle, which John interpreted as a sign in his gospel of witness.”⁷⁵ Mary, the mother of Jesus, took it upon herself to inform him of the dilemma.

He seemed reluctant to accede to His mother’s suggestion and indicated that His action from that time onward would be regulated by His ‘hour’ (2:4). He implied that He was living by a divine schedule that fixed the timing of all His activities and that He could not do something merely to fulfill a request. The fact that He performed the miracle indicated that it accorded with the purpose of God in sending Him into the world.⁷⁶

The implication of his “concession” is that this was indeed more than a favor and in fact it was an important sign of the in-breaking of the Kingdom and the Messianic reign of Christ. Blaney seemingly would agree with this assessment:

⁷⁴ Sweet and Viola, 170.

⁷⁵ Ralph Earle, Charles W. Carter, and Harvey J. S. Blaney, *The Wesleyan Bible Commentary. Matthew - Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 382.

⁷⁶ Tenney, 147.

Jesus was not merely helping out the host in an embarrassing situation, nor satisfying the already over-quenched thirst of the guests. The water, which became wine was water normally used for ceremonial cleansing, after the Jew's manner of purifying. The miracle became the symbol of His work of atonement, 'the outward and visible sign that the water of Judaism was being changed in to the wine of the Christian faith.'⁷⁷

Tenney said, "The nature of the miracle is very plain. Jesus had come to bring about conversion: water to wine, sinners to saints. It marked the beginning of a ministry accompanied by supernatural power and it proved so convincing to the new disciples that they put their trust in Him."⁷⁸ At the close of his gospel (20:30-31), John confirmed that this was the purpose of the signs: "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Finally, Joseph Mayfield offers this interesting observation,

There was a marriage. Though this was a historical event, the wedding is a frequently used metaphor in Jesus' teaching about the nature of the coming Kingdom. The Kingdom is compared to a royal marriage (Matthew 22:2). Jesus describes himself as a Bridegroom and His disciples as guests (Mark 2:19-20). In another setting Jesus is the Bridegroom and John the Baptist is the friend or 'best man' (3:29). In other New Testament figures the Church is the bride and Christ is the Bridegroom (2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 21:2). In an extended metaphor Paul speaks of the Church as the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-32).⁷⁹

Jesus' first miracle in and of itself was remarkable: "by one word of command He accomplished the transformation that a vine required several months to produce."⁸⁰ But more importantly, it profoundly prefigured the introduction of His Kingdom. The New

⁷⁷ Earle, Carter and Blaney, 384.

⁷⁸ Tenney and Longenecker, 43.

⁷⁹ Joseph H. Mayfield, D.D, and Ralph Earle, Th.D., *Beacon Bible Commentary* Vol. 7, John/Acts (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1965), 45.

⁸⁰ Tenney, *Topics from the Gospel of John*, 147.

Covenant was symbolized in the first miracle and in the Last Supper with wine, an emblem of His blood, the washing of regeneration, and the inauguration of a new kind of Kingdom.

The healing of the nobleman’s son – (John 4:46-54) In this story, a nobleman, believed to be a royal official from Herod’s court, requested the Lord’s intervention on behalf of his son, still back at home, on his deathbed. A seemingly cynical Savior replied to his desperate appeal by responding, “Unless you people see signs and wonders...you will never believe” (48). It appears that the crowd’s sign seeking for the sake of sign seeking did not amuse Jesus. However, the anxious father simply replied, “Sir, come down before my child dies” (49).

Clearly the father in this story was not just looking for a sign, he believed that Jesus was his son’s only hope. It is important to interject here that although Jesus’ miracles were not handed out randomly for the sake of entertaining the masses, neither were they strictly for the purpose of proving the arrival of the Messianic Kingdom. Harrison argues, “If the miracles were designed simply to authenticate the claim of Jesus to be sent of God, the execution of a few signs here and there would have been sufficient.”⁸¹ The miracles were intentional; they were, however, not an end unto themselves, rather a means or a conduit to a greater end. Westcott expresses this sentiment well: “They [miracles] are essentially a part of the revelation, and not merely a proof of it.”⁸² Similarly, Warfield said, “Miracles are not merely credentials of revelation, but vehicles of revelation as well.”⁸³

⁸¹ Harrison, 116.

In addition, the miracles of Jesus served a practical function. Matthew's gospel reminds us that "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (9:35-36).

While he questioned the motives of the Galilean sign seekers, he immediately recognized the nobleman's genuine faith and human desperation. In that instance, distance being no hindrance, the nobleman's son was healed. Jesus did not go with him, but sent him on his way with nothing but his faith: "Go," Jesus replied, "your son will live" (50). This was truly a test of faith. If the man had not believed that Jesus was able to heal long distance this would have been perceived as a lack of faith. So, he believed and he went on his way, and according to his servants' report, the boy was healed at that very hour.

Through this miraculous remote healing Jesus demonstrated that his Kingdom could not be limited by space or distance; His sovereignty is infinite. His Kingdom is not a material or physical domain; it is an omnipresent, invisible, and limitless dominion. "Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, 'The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst'" (Luke 17:20-21).

⁸² B. F. Westcott, *Characteristics of the Gospel Miracles* (Cambridge, England: Macmillan, 1859), 3-4.

⁸³ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield and Ethelbert Dudley Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1927), 47.

This truth is demonstrated convincingly in the healing of the nobleman's son. Matthew Henry said, "The healing beams of the Sun of righteousness dispense benign influences from one end of heaven to another, and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof."⁸⁴

The Healing at the Pool of Bethesda – (John 5:1-18) Wherever Jesus went, the religious leaders were not far behind. They were continually watching, following, faultfinding, and seeking to entrap him in their attempt to build a case against him. It has been proposed that the details of the healing of the lame man by the pool of Bethesda are secondary to the occasion of the healing, which was the Sabbath. According to Tenney:

This sign, however, had other overtones as well. Because the healing occurred on the Sabbath, Jesus was instantly accused of breaking the Law of Moses... Controversy over the Sabbath arose frequently and from the very first was a main point of contention. Jesus took the occasion to assert His authority not only over the power of disease, but also over the ceremonial law.⁸⁵

Legalistic observance of the Sabbath day rapidly became the centerpiece of much of the controversy that arose between Jesus and the Pharisees. According to Mark's gospel, Jesus expressed the Father's priority concerning the Sabbath when he said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (2:27).

Historically, religious people have demonstrated a tendency to pervert God-ordained practices by confusing a form of faith with the reality or exercise of faith. The prophet Amos communicated the Lord's displeasure when He said, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies" (Amos 5:21). The healing of

⁸⁴ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 739.

⁸⁵ Tenney, 148.

the palsied man on the Sabbath day struck at the heart of this ongoing conflict. Blaney contends that there were at least four objections Jesus had to the ceremonialism of that time.

First, it placed the people in bondage to form and public opinion. Second, it made unnecessary faith in God as essential to religion. Originally ceremonial laws were provided as evidence of faith in God. But when these things became merely forms they lost their value. Third, there was the loss of personal moral values. And finally, formal ceremonialism was a perversion of what had formerly been the tools of pure worship.⁸⁶

The Lord's perceived irreverence for the Law of Moses stirred up an insatiable rage among the Pharisees. It is recorded in Mark 3 after Jesus healed the man with the shriveled hand on the Sabbath; "Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus" (vs. 6).

An important component of Jesus inaugurated Kingdom was the introduction of a new Sabbath paradigm that exceeds the Law. Mayfield believes that in the miracle of the healing of the palsied man near the pool of Bethesda established this view. "Here is portrayed, in the figure of the pool, the inadequacy of the Law (Judaism) to meet man's real needs. Man's most intense struggles cannot save him from the crippling paralysis of sin."⁸⁷ Saucy proposes, "miracles demonstrated that the kingdom Jesus announced would be Yahweh's promised Sabbath rest, the end of Satan's chaotic exploitation of the creation, the final actualization of divine mercy, and the perfect realization of purity from the heart."⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Earle, Carter and Blaney, 397.

⁸⁷ Mayfield and Earle, 75.

⁸⁸ Saucy, 307.

The feeding of the five thousand – (John 6:5-14) Throughout Jesus’ teaching and preaching ministry, he alluded to “bread” often. It is evident that this sign (*semeion*) recorded in the sixth chapter of John was more than a matter of feeding the hungry. The very fact that it is the only miracle repeated in all four of the gospels is confirmation of its significance in the life and ministry of Jesus. Surely the imagery and symbolism was undeniable even to the eyewitnesses. Sweet and Viola said,

In the feeding of the five thousand, Jews saw Moses in Jesus and the Exodus Israelites in themselves, stranded in a ‘deserted place.’ The story of Jesus feeding barley bread (barley was the poor man’s wheat) to empty bellies not only was the story of Moses and manna redivivus but also echoed the story of the prophet Elisha, who fed a hundred people with twenty loaves of barley.⁸⁹

Bread was a metaphor that Jesus commonly employed in reference to himself, the *autobasileia*. Later in this same chapter “Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty’ (6:35). “Much of what Jesus said there is of a highly sacramental nature. The Old bread (manna) and all it stands for (Judaism, the Law) are inadequate for man’s real need of eternal life, whereas Jesus proclaims himself to be ‘the bread which came down from heaven’, the ‘bread of life.’”⁹⁰ Herbert Lockyer said, “The great lesson of the miracle is evident. Christ is the Bread of Life to a perishing world, and as the Living Bread must be passed on to others by the eaters themselves.”⁹¹

According to Robert Gundry, “John’s linking the feeding of the five thousand to the Passover combines with Jesus’ comments about eating his flesh and drinking his

⁸⁹ Sweet and Viola, 179.

⁹⁰ Mayfield and Earle, 83.

⁹¹ Herbert Lockyer, *All the Miracles of the Bible; the Supernatural in Scripture, Its Scope and Significance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1961), 200.

blood to make the bread with which he feeds the crowd symbolic of his sacrificial death as the true Passover lamb.”⁹²

The people realized that the Kingdom of God was among them. However, they failed to comprehend the nature of Christ’s Kingdom. Merrill Tenney stated, “Their initial reaction was to make Him their king, for they assumed that He could utilize His supernatural abilities to free them from Roman rule and to feed them. Jesus, of course, would not accept any such proposal, since it would be founded on an allegiance prompted by material rather than by spiritual motives.”⁹³

The Kingdom had come very near to them but “the interpretation of the sign which had been given to demonstrate His sufficiency for human need proved to be an insurmountable obstacle to their faith.”⁹⁴ Their preconceived idea of the Savior blinded them from perceiving His presence among them. The first century Jewish notion of the Kingdom of God was anachronous or chronologically misplaced. Their Messianic expectations resembled the promises that would be fulfilled in the Second Advent when the Kingdom is finally consummated. Their failure was in not recognizing the necessity of the Messiah’s First Advent.

Initially, this miracle resulted in a collective euphoric attitude toward Jesus: so much so that they aggressively sought to make him their King. However, shortly thereafter, the tide of opinion radically turned against him and “many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (6:66).

⁹² Robert Horton Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1994), 271.

⁹³ Tenney, 149.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Through the miracle of feeding five thousand with five barley loaves and two fish, Jesus introduced a new Kingdom economy. When His followers embrace His Kingly reign they want for nothing. He is all sufficient and able to accomplish His ultimate purposes when our human resources are depleted.

Jesus walking on water – (John 6:16-24) In reference to this story, also recorded in Matthew 14:22-33 and Mark 6:45-52, Harvey Blaney said, “the multiplication of the loaves and fish and the walking on the water are miracles which demonstrated the power of Jesus over nature in the realm of the preservation of life. He not only gives life, He also sustains it.”⁹⁵

It is interesting that John chose to include the miracle of Jesus walking on the water on his short list of signs; it is one of a few not observed by the multitudes. In all three accounts, Jesus’ disciples were alone. According to John’s version, “When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum” (16-17). While the disciples were rowing across the lake they encountered a swift storm. Suddenly Jesus appeared to them walking on the water toward them, and they were terrified. Merrill Tenney suggests the following interpretation for this seemingly bizarre incident:

Although little explanation accompanies this episode, it seems to have been given as a reassurance to the disciples who were facing danger. Ahead of them loomed greater dangers than that of the storm: the rising enmity of the Jewish hierarchy; the doubts and fears engendered by misunderstanding; the collapse of their expectations of an immediate kingdom; and the bewilderment that would accompany Jesus’ departure from them. He wanted them to learn that He was Master of the forces of nature and that He could avert what seemed to be

⁹⁵ Earle, Carter, and Blaney, 402.

inevitable peril. His presence would be the permanent guarantee of their safety.⁹⁶

The Kingdom that Jesus came to establish was and is an invisible Kingdom: his supremacy and infinite right to rule. In this miracle, as in the story of the calming of the storm (recorded in the synoptic gospels), Jesus demonstrated that his sovereign reign includes power and authority over the laws of nature. “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!”(Matthew 8:27) “So what happened that stormy night was the exercise of Christ’s omnipotence, as He, the Creator of seas and winds, revealed His authority over them, and they being His, He could use them as He desired.”⁹⁷ Sweet and Viola said, “John reported seven miracles, each one a ‘sign’ that Jesus is the Messiah and a parable about what His messiahship birthed and put to rest... Jesus walked on water— laws of nature are dead.”⁹⁸

The healing of the man who was born blind – (John 9:1-7) While John the Baptist was in prison prior to his execution, he sent a delegation to Jesus inquiring, “are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Luke 7:20) According to Luke’s Gospel:

At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, ‘Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.’

The Lord’s reply to John was apparently sufficient confirmation that his own mission was accomplished. To what extent John the Baptist understood the inaugurated

⁹⁶ Tenney, 150.

⁹⁷ Lockyer, *All the Miracles of the Bible*, 201.

⁹⁸ Sweet and Viola, 190.

Kingdom of God is unknown. However, he evidently comprehended his own role as the Messiah's forerunner, and recognized that signs including the blind receiving sight were persuasive. "One Jewish scholar has argued that the ancient Jews regarded the following three miracles to be 'Messianic': 1. The cleansing of lepers. 2. The casting out of demons 3. The healing of blindness."⁹⁹

One of the unique characteristics of the miracle under consideration was that this man was *born* blind. Typically one born blind has undeveloped or deformed eyes. For Jesus to heal this man's blindness would have required a re-creation or creation of his eyes. Perhaps the Lord's purpose in the making of mud and application to the man's eyes was an intentional allusion to creation when "The Word" (John 1:1) formed man out of the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7). Whatever the case, this was an especially remarkable circumstance, and the conversation that ensued concerning "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind" (vs.9) reveals the distinctiveness of this particular miracle.

This extraordinary occurrence attracted the attention of Jesus' enemies. Sweet and Viola noted, "Whenever Jesus performed one of these miracles, [*cleansing of lepers; casting out of demons; healing blindness*] the Jewish response was radically different from when He performed other types of miracles... saying, "Could this be the Son of David?"¹⁰⁰ However, in this instance, the religious people did not respond favorably, due to the fact that the miracle was performed on the Sabbath. Consequently, they interrogated the healed man and his parents and eventually they excommunicated and removed him from the Synagogue.

⁹⁹ Sweet and Viola, 167.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 168.

The message concealed in the miracle is that the Kingdom of God brings spiritual sight to the blind: cleansing, healing, and wholeness for the broken. Gundry said,

This healing brings light to a blind man and thus carried on the theme of Jesus as the light of the world. That the man has been blind from birth makes his healing a kind of new birth... Spittle is popularly thought to have curative power, and also to set the stage for washing, which symbolizes a moral cleansing by the Holy Spirit.¹⁰¹

The raising of Lazarus from the dead – (John 11:1-57) This was the last and perhaps the greatest sign recorded in the fourth Gospel. The events that led to the raising of Lazarus from the dead are perplexing. Jesus received word of Lazarus' illness a couple of days prior to his departure for Bethany. Both of Lazarus' sisters proclaimed upon his arrival, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Harvey Blaney said, "There is no doubt that Jesus could have healed Lazarus without coming to Bethany, as He had healed the nobleman's son (4:46-54). But the need of this climactic sign was so great that the suffering of His friend became a service to God."¹⁰²

It is generally thought that the Lord's delay was intentional, paving the way for this outstanding miracle. Although Jesus had raised the dead prior to this event, as Tenney explains,

To witness another healing would be no novelty; they had undoubtedly seen many such miracles. There had also been two occasions on which Jesus had restored the dead to life: Jairus' daughter, who had been dead only a short time (Matt. 9:18-26; Mark 5:22-43; Luke 8:40-42, 49-56); and the son of a widow at Nain (Luke 7:1-17). Both of these were persons who had expired only hours before Jesus came; Lazarus had been dead for four days when the miracle occurred. The raising of

¹⁰¹ Gundry, 275.

¹⁰² Earle, Carter, and Blaney, 427.

Lazarus would, therefore, have been much more convincing to those who observed it.¹⁰³

The significance of Lazarus being dead for four days is particularly profound in the context of Hebrew thought and tradition. “Jews believed a deceased person’s spirit hovers over the corpse for three days then leaves, despairing of a resuscitation, whereas Lazarus has been dead four days, one day beyond hope, as evident from the stench that has developed.”¹⁰⁴

This miracle of the Kingdom validates the claim that Jesus Christ has authority in heaven and earth; including authority over death. Although death still retains a temporal hold (*Lazarus eventually died a natural death even after his miraculous resurrection from the dead*), Jesus ultimately rose permanently from the dead assuring us that we too will live. In the inaugurated Kingdom we have life abundant, in the consummated Kingdom we will have life eternal. The last enemy to be finally destroyed is death.

However, consistent with the thesis of this project, the resurrection of Lazarus again is a reminder that the biblical treatment of the Kingdom of God as “already/not yet” does not address the contemporary preoccupation with the intermediate state. It would seem that if this theme had been important in the mind of God, Lazarus would have represented the ideal opportunity to divulge at least the minutest detail concerning what happens between our physical death and final resurrection. The teachings of Jesus focus primarily on what the Kingdom of God looks like in the present, and to a lesser extent

¹⁰³ Tenney, 153.

¹⁰⁴ Gundry, 277.

(*though not less important*) what it will look like in the next age, but conspicuously ignores particulars relating to the intermediate state.

The resurrection of Lazarus occurred about one month prior to Jesus' own trial, death and resurrection. Lockyer states that this was "His third miracle of resurrection – the most remarkable of all His mighty works, and which foreshadowed His own resurrection and also made a profound impression in Jerusalem but brought the Sanhedrin to its final decision to seek the death of Christ."¹⁰⁵ Clearly there were mixed opinions. The passage indicates that although many put their faith in Him as a result of this demonstration of His authority, others went to the Scribes and Pharisees to report what Jesus had done. The Sanhedrin gathered to decide a course of action. John regards the high priest's words as prophetic (11:49-53):

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, 'You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.' He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

"John noted two important things in the statement of the high priest: (1) it was actually a prophecy, uttered by the high priest in the true function of his office. (2) It implied a universal sacrifice. Jesus would die not only for the Jews but 'for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.'"¹⁰⁶

The High Priests involuntary prophecy arguably demonstrates that this was the last straw in a series of events leading to Christ's arrest. "God had given both power and authority into His hands, He had power within Himself to raise the dead and give new

¹⁰⁵ Lockyer, 227.

¹⁰⁶ Mayfield and Earle, 142.

life, because He was both the giver and the sustainer of that life. His demonstration was so conclusive and so damaging to the position taken by the Jews, that it became the immediate cause for the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus.”¹⁰⁷

In addition to John’s seven signs, there is an eighth that is so pervasive in the synoptic gospels that it warrants consideration. In Matthew 12:28 Jesus said, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Franz Mussner declared, “Without doubt Jesus came to make open war on the reign of Satan.”¹⁰⁸ Sweet and Viola clearly concur with this view:

Jesus’ healings demonstrated that the arrival of God’s rule over evil was breaking into the present. For Jesus, healings and the casting out of demons were signs of the dawning kingdom. They indicated that God’s future had arrived. They were tangible signposts that the kingdom of God was coming to earth as it is in heaven...By healing the sick and casting out demons, Jesus was effectively saying, ‘This is what happens when God is running the world. This is what it looks like when God is King of the earth. The time has come; the dominion of God is breaking into the present. This is what happens when God becomes King on earth as He is in heaven. And contrary to popular opinion, God’s rule will benefit those who are regarded as being the most unworthy.’¹⁰⁹

The inaugurated Kingdom spells the end of sin, death, and Satan. These will not be finally destroyed until the Kingdom of God has been consummated at the end of the age, but through the sinless life, death and resurrection of the Son of God, they have lost their powerful grip; they have been essentially rendered impotent. The multiplicity of instances of Jesus casting out demons is a vital sign of the inauguration of the reign of Christ. George Eldon Ladd articulates it so well:

The power of the Kingdom of God has invaded the realm of Satan—the present

¹⁰⁷ Earle, Carter and Blaney, 427.

¹⁰⁸ Franz Mussner, *The Miracles of Jesus*, trans. Albert Wimmer (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1968), 43.

¹⁰⁹ Sweet and Viola, 169.

evil Age. The activity of this power to deliver men from satanic rule was evidenced in the exorcism of demons. Thereby, Satan was bound; he was cast down from his position of power; his power was 'destroyed.' The blessings of the Messianic Age are now available to those who embrace the Kingdom of God. We may already enjoy the blessings resulting from this initial defeat of Satan. Yes, the Kingdom of God has come near, it is already present.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Ladd, 49.

CHAPTER THREE: THE UNIVERSAL KINGDOM OF GOD

The Universal Kingdom of God – Defined

In the previous chapter, we examined what Jesus had to say about the Kingdom of God in the Gospels, specifically through his parables and miracles. The disparity between how Jesus talked about the Kingdom and how many people today talk about it is conspicuous. Many people think of Kingdom of God as a place you go when you die, rather than the sovereign rule of God brought from Heaven to earth. N. T. Wright argues that this incorrect reading of the Gospels has resulted in a great deal of confusion regarding the Kingdom of Heaven: “It is as though you were to get a letter from the president of the United States inviting himself to stay at your home, and in your excitement you misread it and assumed that he was inviting you to stay at the White House.”¹ The unfortunate consequence is an apparent blindness to the presence of the Kingdom of God in our midst (Luke 17:20-21). According to authors Leonard Sweet and Frank Viola,

Modern Western Christian movements have taught us that Jesus has a kingdom, but it’s not part of this world. It’s the equivalent of heaven after you die. This interpretation is based on various misreadings of certain things Jesus said... Jesus taught, however, that the kingdom of God comes from somewhere else. It comes from another realm. But it is ultimately for this world, and it will ultimately fill the physical universe. What is more, it can be experienced now.²

The Kingdom which Jesus inaugurated through his sinless life, suffering, death, and resurrection is announced in the Great Commission passage recorded in Matthew 28:18-20, among other places. The resurrected and glorified Christ proclaimed, “All

¹ N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 86.

² Sweet and Viola, *Jesus: A Theography*, 157.

authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.” Jesus declared his universal sovereignty, “on earth as it is in Heaven.” Those living in submission to King Jesus incarnate his reign in many places. His all-present and powerful sovereignty is experienced cross-culturally by people of various languages, ethnicities, and traditions: young/old, men/women, people from every conceivable social and political stratification. God reigns over all with equity and does not show partiality.

Wright celebrates the “already” inaugurated Kingdom when he asserts, “God really has become king in and through Jesus! A new state of affairs has been brought in to existence. A door has been opened that nobody can shut. Jesus is now the world’s rightful Lord, and all other lords are to fall at his feet.”³ Christ has initiated a new world order: “the old has gone, the new has come.” For many, however, a preoccupation and perhaps even a fixation with the consummation of the Kingdom of God has overshadowed and undermined their comprehension of the Kingdom in our midst.

Matthew 24:14 tells us what to expect with respect to the consummation of the future “not yet” Kingdom of God: “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.” For those who have made a hobby out of predicting the end of the age, as we understand it, the words of Jesus in the above passage are too vague. Others, like George Eldon Ladd, embrace ambiguity saying, “I am not setting any dates. I do not know when the end will come. And yet I do know this: when the Church has finished its task of evangelizing the world, Christ will come again. The Word of God says it.”⁴

³ Wright, 130.

⁴ Winter, Hawthorne, Dorr, Graham, and Koch, 74.

It seems that this passage is assuring us that once the proclamation of the Gospel has produced a “viable presence” among all people everywhere, the Kingdom in its final form will come. Ralph Winter and Bruce Koch define viable presence as follows: “It is viable in that it can grow on its own, ‘indigenous’ meaning that it is not seen as foreign, and a ‘church planting movement’ that continues to produce intergenerational fellowships that are able to evangelize the rest of the people group.”⁵

Revelation 7:9 anticipates what the consummation of God’s Kingdom will look like at the Second Advent of Christ: “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.” Howard A. Snyder uses similar language to describe the universality of the *inaugurated* Kingdom in these words: “God’s people scattered throughout the world in hundreds of specific denominations, movements and other structures. It is the inclusive, worldwide, corporate reality of the multitude of men and women who throughout history have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.”⁶

The “already” Kingdom is now; it exists in the present: the interim period between the First and Second Advents of Jesus Christ. This Kingdom has profound implications in our world as is powerfully demonstrated throughout the Gospels, and ought to be convincingly validated through the lives of Christ followers all over the world. The role of Kingdom citizens is to be Kingdom witnesses. The lives, works and influence of Christ’s followers ought to function as a sort of “demonstration plot” to

⁵ Ibid., 517.

⁶ Ibid., 140.

borrow a spatial metaphor. In Matthew 11:5, Jesus tells us plainly what the Kingdom of God looks like in this present age: “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” Christ’s sovereign rule on earth means freedom for the oppressed, hope for the hopeless, deliverance for those shackled in chains of addiction, healing for the brokenhearted, and the discovery of Truth for the blind; those who were wandering aimlessly under the influence and deception of the counter-kingdom.

In this chapter we will consider the extent to which our inadequate and inaccurate characterization of Christ’s Global Sovereignty leads to incorrect *assumptions* concerning the universality of his reign. Subsequently, our false assumptions result in a “kingdom” that is more of an *aspiration* than an *actual* experience.

The Universal Kingdom of God – Assumed

The first way that the Kingdom of God is commonly believed to be universal is through the expansion of the visible church. It is supposed that the expansion of the church is synonymous with the growth of the Kingdom. The rationality of such an assumption is contingent upon one’s definition of church. The following five definitions are given for the word church according to Dictionary.com:

1. A building for public Christian worship.
2. Public worship of God or a religious service in such a building: *to attend church regularly.*
3. The whole body of Christian believers; Christendom.
4. Any division of this body professing the same creed and acknowledging the same ecclesiastical authority; a Christian denomination: *the Methodist Church.*

5. That part of the whole Christian body, or of a particular denomination, belonging to the same city, country, nation, etc.⁷

These dictionary definitions are not synonymous with the Kingdom of God, and one should not assume that the promotion of such institutions automatically results in the expansion of Christ's universal reign.

The following example demonstrates how we often equate Church and Kingdom. I serve on a denominational board that oversees district church planting efforts. Recently an experienced Hispanic church planter from another denomination offered to partner with our denomination in an effort to launch a new Hispanic church in downtown Denver. Our district leadership acknowledged the potential risk that the congregation might eventually choose to affiliate with the planter's denomination after we have invested our resources for the launching of a Wesleyan church in that community. The group discussed it briefly and decided they could live with the "risk" considering "worst-case scenario the Kingdom of God would be advanced" even if the shingle out front has someone else's name on it. While I admire the spirit of this decision (which was arrived at very quickly), I cringe when I encounter such a woefully inadequate treatment of the term Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is frequently reduced to the work of the church, particularly when it involves ecumenical or cross-denominational cooperation. Such efforts may or may not promote the rule of Christ. To assume that this sort of collaboration is evidence of the Kingdom of God is naïve. New Testament scholars agree that the Greek word *Ecclesia* was translated into English as "Church." The word *Ecclesia* was formed from two Greek words: *Ecc* (out of, or out from), and *Kaleo* (call). It is generally agreed that the term is correctly defined: "The called-out (ones)." According to

⁷ Dictionary.com. <http://dictionary.reference.com/> (accessed November 12, 2013).

this explanation, church in the purest sense is a gathering of the people called out or set apart/unto Christ. It is a community of people sent into the world as Kingdom witnesses. Andy Stanley presents an interesting account of how we have come to misunderstand the word church:

The Romans called each of these gathering places a basilica, the Latin word used to denote a public building or official meeting place. Gothic (or Germanic) cultures, also influenced by Christianity, used the word *kirika*, which became *kirche* in modern German. The word meant ‘house of the lord,’ and was used to refer to any ritual gathering place, Christian or pagan. This Germanic term became the one used most often to refer to the *ekklesia* of Jesus, and from it we get the word church... The word church is not a translation from the Greek. It is a substitution for the Greek, and a bad one at that. The German term *kirche* and the Greek term *ekklesia* refer to two very different ideas. A *kirche* is a location. An *ekklesia* is a purposeful gathering of people.⁸

It could be argued that within every church there are citizens of the Kingdom of God; those who entered, received, embraced the rule of Christ. Following Stanley’s line of reasoning, within every *kirche* there is an *ecclesia*. It could also be argued that within every church there are members who seemingly know nothing of the Kingdom of God and, worse yet, those so deceived by the enemy that they have come to represent a counter-kingdom (Matthew 13:24-30). Although followers of Christ are ambassadors of His Kingdom, they are not themselves the Kingdom of God. Members of the *ecclesia* are participants in the Kingdom of God and physical, visible witnesses of that Kingdom.

Referring to the church or the work of the church as the Kingdom of God is inaccurate. Our tendency to interchange the terms Kingdom and church is often murky and confusing. As we continue to evaluate the universal Kingdom of God, we will be careful not to succumb to this inclination. The redeemed are eye witnesses of the

⁸ Andy Stanley, *Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), Kindle Locations 635-642.

Kingdom; we are the ones called out, set apart and sent forth to incarnate the Kingdom of God and to introduce the world around us to a new world order.

The Universal Kingdom of God – Aspirational

Any goal worth aspiring toward will be difficult to achieve. The highest aspiration of the *ecclesia* of God is to effectively incarnate the Kingdom of God: to be Kingdom witnesses in the world. While we often assume that the work and programs of the church are somehow “kingdom business” often they are not. There is an inherent dichotomy between aspirational and actual. This incongruence is commonly the product of competing aspirations; the leadership has one set of goals and expectations, and the followership has another. Every pastor knows what it is like to represent an aspirational value or mission. He or she passionately proclaims a particular vision endlessly only to discover that it has not been universally accepted. I have discovered that many churches are guilty of the old “bait and switch” gimmick. We broadly publicize our “shared” values in flyers, newspapers, and websites. But when the prospect visits our *kirche*, they soon learn that our values are more aspirational than actual.

This reality affects all institutions. For example, one of the stated American values is *E Pluribus Unum* – “Out of many, one.” This Latin phrase is stamped on U.S. currency and is meant to celebrate the American value of unity and equality for all. The United States of America is sometimes referred to as the “Great Melting Pot.” It is generally assumed that this is a *universal* value cherished by all Americans. However, an assumed value is not necessarily an actual value, as proven by Jim Lo, who quoted former Major League Baseball relief pitcher John Rocker: “The biggest thing I do not

like about New York are the foreigners. You can walk an entire block in Times Square and not hear anybody speaking English; Asians and Koreans and Vietnamese and Indians and Russians and Spanish people and everything up there. How...did they get here?”⁹ Obviously not everyone celebrates ethnic diversity, although historically, it is a professed American value. Lady Liberty welcomes immigrants to her shore boasting, “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” These two voices demonstrate co-existing yet conflicting values. Assumed values are often more aspirational than actual.

In the same way that people generally *assume* America is the great melting pot with open shores and open doors welcoming the “tired, poor and huddled masses,” so too the church assumes that incarnating the universal Kingdom of God and invading the world around us with its promises and priorities is a universally shared value and conviction. E. Stanley Jones said, “If Jesus made the kingdom of God the center of his message and the center of his endeavor, the greatest need of man, as I see it, is to rediscover the kingdom of God.”¹⁰ The priority of the Kingdom is so fundamental and essential we cannot afford to assume its universal acceptance and we cannot ignore the fact that often what we call *evidence* of the reign of Christ in our midst is essentially more aspirational than actual. Sweet and Viola describe what it looks like when God is ruling the earth:

⁹ Jim Lo, *Intentional Diversity: Creating Cross-Cultural Ministry Relationships in Your Church* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Pub. House, 2002), 9.

¹⁰ E. Stanley Jones, *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 11.

It looks like this: physical healing; deliverance from evil spirits; feasting with outcasts, prostitutes, tax collectors, and thieves; the embracing of Samaritans; hardened hearts softened; forgiveness granted to those who have sinned; freedom from bondage; and mourners finding joy in God. All of these elements featured prominently in Jesus' ministry. They all testify to the inclusiveness of the kingdom of God. They all bear witness to what it looks like when God is reigning on the earth.¹¹

Undoubtedly, at various times and in diverse places, the Rule of Christ has been observed in phenomenal ways. However, Christ's victorious Kingdom has sometimes been robbed of its witness in the world due to the influence of the counter-kingdom. The prince of this world deceptively wields weapons like ethnocentricity, denominationalism, and poverty to rob the Kingdom of God of its impact.

Ethnocentricity: "Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own culture is superior to another. It is cultural arrogance."¹² Just as ethnocentricity has frustrated the great American experiment, *E Pluribus Unum*, it has also created a barrier for Kingdom witnesses who have, with noble intentions, sought to carry the good news of the King/Kingdom around the globe. Christ's ambassadors have often imposed cultural values and unwittingly subordinated Kingdom values. It becomes "objectionable when people believe that their values are the only correct ones and that all people everywhere should be judged by how closely they live up to those values."¹³ Ethnocentrism, which assumes or implies superiority, has become a barrier for many entering the Kingdom of God. Similarly, Colonialism proved that Western supremacy as an ulterior motive of the mission enterprise corrupted and undermined the effectiveness of the early mission

¹¹ Sweet and Viola, 156-157.

¹² Lo, 43.

¹³ Ibid., 45.

movement. “Christian explorers bring more than just their faith. They also bring a profound sense of cultural superiority, and a lust for wealth.”¹⁴ This perceived invasion of the African continent has been described as a colonial intrusion. “One of Achebe’s characters remarks, ‘the white man, the new religion, the soldiers, the new road – they are all part of the same thing...’”¹⁵ And Kenyan leader Jomo Kenyatta complained, “when the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said ‘Let’s pray.’ We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land.”¹⁶

While these examples may seem like ancient history, the evidence of Western/White supremacy still exists, and still inhibits the churches aspiration to powerfully demonstrate the universal Kingdom/reign of Jesus in the world today.

According to Phillip Jenkins “in 1800 perhaps 1 percent of all Protestant Christians lived outside Europe and North America. By 1900 that number had risen to 10 percent...today, the figure [of those who live outside Europe and North America] stands around two-thirds of all Protestants.”¹⁷ Timothy Tennent said, “There is a global Christian revolution happening outside the Western world, and most Western Christians are only gradually beginning to realize the full implications of this shift...despite the dramatic growth of the Majority World church, the center of theological education and Christian scholarship remains in the Western world.”¹⁸ There is an apparent reluctance to

¹⁴ Lo, 48.

¹⁵ Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (London: Heinemann, 1964), 189.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 45.

allow Christ followers from the “Majority World” to participate in theological dialogue, not unlike the mainstream cleric who complained, “Your beliefs are too young, suggesting that the new churches simply do not have the intellectual capacity to understand the sophisticated theological debates roiling the advanced world.”¹⁹

Brenda Salter McNeil, on the other hand, welcomes a non-western voice: “We who were raised in the West, with the West's rational worldview, can try to explain that story away. But I believe we need African Christians to teach us how to preach the gospel in power. The West is overwhelmed with information for information's sake and wary of truth that is rational yet impotent.”²⁰ Jenkins quoted a Nigerian pastor who stated, “This is the time of the African. The Europeans have had their time, the Asians have had their time, and the Americans have had their time. The black man is going to read the last Gospel before the coming of Christ.”²¹ Jenkins contends historically there has existed a “fear of a black planet,”²² an uprising of the Global South that would “overwhelm Europe and America.” Allegiances to kingdoms other than the supreme and sovereign reign of God continue to impede the visible victory of Christ’s Kingdom. However, Christians still assume *E Pluribus Unum*, and give lip service to the biblical value of oneness in Christ. Jim Lo contends, “The American Church has turned away from the hard work of seeking to understand other worldviews and relating meaningfully to people who hold

¹⁸ Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 11.

¹⁹ Jenkins, 243.

²⁰ Brenda Salter McNeil, “Behold the Global Church.” *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/november/34.42.html> (accessed September 5, 2012).

²¹ Robyn Dixon, “African Catholics Seek a Voice to Match Their Growing Strength.” *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 2005. www.latimes.com (accessed December 31, 2013).

²² Jenkins, 224.

them.”²³ The enemy cunningly and deceptively introduces opposing values that weaken the progress of Christ’s Kingdom witnesses. Fortunately God’s emissaries/missionaries are learning that “adapting the gospel to local cultures is the path to growth, while trying to force others into a Western straitjacket invited disaster.”²⁴

Next we will consider how the rise of denominationalism has inadvertently destabilized the churches resolve to incarnate Christ’s universal reign on earth.

Denominationalism: The splintering of the institutional/organizational church into thousands of denominations has been named hyper-pluralism. The first millennium of the Church experienced relative unity with all parts essentially in communion with one another. “This all came crashing to an end in AD 1054, with a massive political, theological, and cultural separation of East and West...the second millennium has been marked more by division than by unity.”²⁵ During the third quarter of the twentieth century, great progress was made toward a new ecumenism, “but for many, the pace of formal ecumenical successes has diminished to such an extent that they wonder whether the churches are not now at an impasse.”²⁶

Historically, most new denominations have splintered off of existing denominations over doctrinal disputes. This phenomenon in and of itself has not necessarily weakened the church’s enterprise, which is to introduce the power of Christ’s

²³ Lo, 12.

²⁴ Jenkins, 38.

²⁵ Max L. Stackhouse, Tim Dearborn, and Scott Paeth, *The Local Church in a Global Era: Reflections for a New Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2000), 168.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 169-170.

Kingdom presence. People holding to a wide variety of doctrinal positions and representing many traditions can conceivably continue to effectively incarnate the Kingdom of God. The indirect consequences of denominationalism, however, have quite evidently undermined the mission in the following ways.

Differences in our various interpretations of non-essential matters and worship style preferences are often perceived by onlookers as a sign of disunity. One can easily understand how this apparent disunity has resulted in a diminished confidence in the church's message. Our apparent inability to agree with one another has wounded our credibility. Furthermore, some churches have placed the importance of indoctrinating members on non-essential distinctives above ministering to the world around them. In addition, many churches have resorted to the promotion of a plethora of programs rather than compellingly witnessing the power of the Kingdom of God.

Craig Van Gelder suggests, however, that the current trend is anti-denominational and pro-missional. He believes that this is ultimately beneficial for the universal Kingdom of God. He states in an article entitled, *Rethinking Denominations and Denominationalism in Light of a Missional Ecclesiology*, "Congregations are created by the Spirit and exist to engage the world missionally, bringing God's redemptive work in Christ to bear on every dimension of life. And being true to their missional identity, they can never function primarily as an end in themselves – a tendency of the self understanding of the established church."²⁷

Cecil Robeck, Jr. also anticipates a new ecumenism. He says,

²⁷ Craig Van Gelder, "Rethinking Denominations and Denominationalism in Light of a Missional Ecclesiology." *Word & World* 25, no. 1: 23-33. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed December 6, 2012).

Christians are realizing they need more than they have been receiving in spiritual isolation from the rest of the church...each year I ask my students how many of them are still members of the denominations of their birth. Each year the number seems to drop; denominational loyalty is rare these days.”²⁸

Robeck refers to this trend as a *grassroots ecumenism*, and adds, “it is not always well thought out. It is not always for the best reasons. It may be sloppy. But it is real, nonetheless.”²⁹

The hierarchical ladder of denominationalism is further evidence of how the church has failed to demonstrate the global reign of Christ in the world. Servant leadership is a major theme and a significant characteristic of the Kingdom of God. In Matthew 18:4, Jesus said, “Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Again, in Matthew 23:11, he stated, “The greatest among you will be your servant.” And when his disciples were squabbling about their respective places of prominence in the Kingdom of God, he said, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves” (Luke 22:25-26). Finally, in John 13, Jesus powerfully demonstrated this Kingdom principle when he wrapped a towel around his waist, knelt down before his disciples, and washed their feet.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ he asked them. ‘You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater

²⁸ Stackhouse, Dearborn, and Paeth, 172.

²⁹ Ibid.

than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.’(John 13:12-17)

The institutional church (*kirche*) has largely failed to embrace this posture of humility. We have taken our cues from the world around us and have missed a great opportunity to demonstrate the new world order in this arena. In instances where this Kingdom conviction has been incorporated, our “leadership” chart is turned upside down in comparison to the standards of this world. According to Leonard Sweet,

The counterintuitive nature of God’s kingdom serves as the power base of its functioning organics. ‘Get more by letting go of what you have,’ ‘The first will be the last,’ ‘The least will be the greatest,’ ‘The weak will be the strong’—statements such as these are meaningless to the moguls of mammon. Being ‘strong in the broken places’ or ‘God’s strength is made perfect in human weakness’ makes no sense to Madison Avenue minds.³⁰

If the citizens of God’s inaugurated reign lived by this Kingdom code instead of imitating the kingdoms of this world, our churches would be more focused on serving the least and the lost and less consumed with impressing denominational agents and agencies. We have allowed the worldly desire for power and position to subvert this Kingdom principle of humble servanthood. Again quoting Sweet:

Jesus says, ‘Among you it will be different.’ You want to be first? Be last! You want to be greatest? Be least! You want to find yourself? Lose yourself! You want to be exalted? Be humble. The first question in a followership culture is this: Is it different among us? Jesus points to the surrounding culture and its way of leading. The surrounding culture dominates and in many cases oppresses those under it. In fact, it celebrates that domination, that hierarchy, and esteems the rights and privileges that come from being on top. Jesus calls us instead to follow the model of the house servant and the bond slave, to give up our rights and privileges in order to serve the interest of another.³¹

³⁰ Leonard Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus* (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2012), 89.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

Within the current leadership culture of the church (*kirche*), “servant-leadership” is often perceived to be synonymous with non-leadership. Leonard Sweet advocates embracing a “followership culture” as opposed to a “leadership culture.” He reasons, “To emphasize followership is not to eliminate the notion that we need leaders. It is to flush the definitions, concepts, and practices of flesh-based leadership down the sewer they came from.”³² In a similar vein, Greg Ogden said,

Servant leaders lead, but with a style not reflective of the popular culture. Jesus instructed his followers to walk away from the prevailing Gentile and Jewish models of prideful leadership, where dominance (‘lording it over’), coercion, titles, and public recognition were the goals. ‘Not so with you,’ Jesus exclaimed (Matthew 20:26). Jesus instead spoke of leaders who serve. Servant leaders still do the things leaders do—direct, organize, envision. But with *servant* qualifying *leadership*, the kingdom of God—not one’s personal fiefdom—becomes our motivation and shapes our style of leadership.³³

Sweet argues, “The leadership myth pervades our structures, our personalities, and our language—in terms like senior pastor, lead pastor, and executive pastor. We have created entire categories of titles to enforce the leadership diversion at best, the leadership perversion at worst.”³⁴

The visible, organizational, institutional church acknowledges the presence and authority of Christ’s Global sovereignty. We talk a great deal about the “already” Kingdom of God and what it ought to look like in the world today. However, in practice, its application is more aspirational than actual.

³² Ibid, 39.

³³ James D. Berkley, *Leadership Handbook of Management and Administration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 150.

³⁴ Sweet, *I Am A Follower*, 39.

Poverty: In James 1:27 we are reminded, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” Matthew 25:35-40 has been called “The Great Compassion Commandment.” In this familiar and convicting parable, Jesus persuasively demonstrates what it means to be Kingdom witnesses in this present age. “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat...Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you,’ ...The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” As has already been stated, one of the key signs of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God is the proclamation of good news to the poor. Ambassadors of the inaugurated reign of Christ incarnate the Kingdom in the world when we serve the King by serving the “least of these brothers and sisters of mine.”

And yet, “Presently 1.5 billion people live in absolute poverty... Seventy percent of these are women and children. More than half of the people on the planet earn less than \$2.00 per day; 1.75 billion lack safe drinking water; 100 million are homeless; 800 million go hungry every day; 150 million are undernourished.”³⁵ Phillip Jenkins said “When Americans see the images of starvation from Africa, like the hellish visions from Ethiopia in the 1980s, very few realize that the victims involved share not just a common humanity but in many cases the same religion. Those are Christians starving to death.”³⁶

Conscientious Kingdom ambassadors must necessarily endeavor to ascertain that which distinguishes Kingdom priorities from “do-gooding.” Certainly those who introduce the power of the Kingdom of God in the world ought to “do good”, but it is

³⁵ Stackhouse, Dearborn, and Paeth, 39.

³⁶ Jenkins, 257.

important to establish kingdom motives from a humanitarian concern. For instance, in the late 1800s, Lee Jones

Formed the Liverpool Food Association after a visit to the slums triggered his interest in the diet of the poor. The society provided cheap meals for children as they left school, and the lady attendants brought food to invalids at home. He renamed his society the League of Welldoers in 1909, as part of a general protest against state intervention, timed to coincide with a landmark review of the Poor Laws. Jones believed that philanthropy should suffice and that it negated the need for an increasingly professional and overpaid cadre of social workers.³⁷

Jones believed that philanthropy was a better option than government social services. I am proposing that the Kingdom principle characterized as genuine compassion for the least of these is superior to philanthropy. Historically, the church's efforts to practically apply this Kingdom priority have degenerated into a social gospel that is not much different than Jones' League of Welldoers. N. T. Wright remarked, "The 'social gospel' may have helped to clean up some slums, to reduce working hours for women and children in factories, and so on. Wonderful. But, homelessness and virtual slave labor are still realities in the modern Western world, never mind elsewhere. Has anything really changed?"³⁸ Even Jesus said, "the poor you will always have with you" (Matthew 26:11).

The prince of this world and his counter-kingdom have certainly wrecked havoc, and its consequences linger. However, Christ's ambassadors have the privilege of invading this world with the power of the gospel. We recognize that the inaugurated Kingdom is only a shadow of that which is to come, but we are called to introduce this new world order. We are initiators of a counter-cultural attack against the kingdom of darkness. We extend the influence of the Global reign of Christ by setting captives free in

³⁷ Emily Cockayne, *Cheek by Jowl: A History of Neighbours* (London: Bodley Head, 2012), 116-117.

³⁸ Wright, 59.

the power of the Spirit, out of love and devotion to the King: “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

Because we believe that one of the characteristics of the inaugurated Kingdom is exhibited by concern for the poor, it must become an even greater priority among people of faith. Our apparent toleration of the suffering and inequality in our world is another reminder that Kingdom citizens often fail to incarnate the Kingdom. “20% of the world’s population consumes 80% of the food resources. In the US, we spend between \$30 billion and \$50 billion every year on diet related expenditures...Many North Americans literally eat themselves to death.”³⁹ The disparity between those who have too much and those who have nothing is incriminating evidence, supporting the case that values are often more aspirational than actual. Obviously the problem of wealth distribution and global economy is a complex issue that will not be resolved in this present age. But Dario Lopez implores Christ’s followers to reflect on the following challenge:

For those who consider themselves disciples of the Lord of Life, who is just and loves justice, true awareness means committing oneself to finding answers to the following questions: What will the poor of the world eat and where will they sleep today? Do they all have access to a job and worthy salaries, or are they exploited with impunity so that the rich accumulate more wealth?⁴⁰

C. Rene Padilla wrote,

God’s preferential option for the poor was demonstrated in the person and work of Jesus Christ, who claimed to be anointed by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18-19). While there is good reason for a warning against a socio-political reduction of his ministry, no proper understanding of the teaching of the New Testament is possible unless one sees Jesus’ mission as the fulfillment of God’s purpose to

³⁹ Winter, Hawthorne, Dorr, Graham, and Koch, 570.

⁴⁰ Brian D. McLaren, Elisa Padilla, and Ashley Bunting Seeber, *The Justice Project* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 151-152.

establish his kingdom of justice and peace. In anticipation of the end, the kingdom of God has come into history, the new era has started, and the basis has been laid to proclaim good news to the poor.⁴¹

James Ottley said, “God calls us, our minds and our hands, to be used for the benefit of all so that everywhere the people of the world may enjoy the benefits of all of God’s creation. If this is to be a better world, then we must respond to the needs of the poor. The eradication of poverty must be at the top of our list.”⁴²

Lynne Hybels and Nathan George suggest the following small steps that Kingdom witnesses can take to express our awareness of the inequity in our fallen world, and our intention to be part of a solution: “limit consumption; give more generously to people in need; and increasingly buy fair trade products.”⁴³ These are simple yet reasonable steps that anyone can take.

What could happen if 130 million Christians embraced fair trade as a means of bringing good news to the poor and meaning to the rich? What if we began to see our spending, not just our giving, as a matter of discipleship? The fair trade transaction is not simply about the flow of goods and cash. It is about the flow of life in God’s kingdom – a flow of both material and spiritual abundance that blesses the poor with prosperity and redeems the sometimes shallow and disconnected lives of the rich.⁴⁴

This is not a new concept; this brand of stewardship was preached and practiced even in the eighteenth century by the English reformer, John Wesley.

Wesley wrote powerfully to the press about the wide gulf between rich and poor, as he had often done before. He suggested that bread would be cheaper if great quantities of corn were not used in distilling strong drink; meat would not be so scarce and dear if the nobility and gentry would stop the ‘amazing waste’ allowed in their kitchens and eat less enormous meals. He urged men and women to ‘gain all you can’ by rightful means and hard work without harming others, to ‘save all

⁴¹ Ibid., 26.

⁴² Stackhouse, Dearborn, and Paeth, 42.

⁴³ McLaren, Padilla, and Seeber, 240.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 242.

you can' by avoiding extravagance and needless expense. 'Having first *gained* all you can, and secondly *saved* all you can, then *give* all you can.' To save did not mean to hoard. In Wesley's view, 'You may well throw your money into the sea as bury it in the earth...or in the Bank of England. Not to use, is effectually to throw it away.' The money should provide 'things needful for yourself and your household,' and what is left over should be given away to help the poor and to extend the kingdom of God.⁴⁵

It is said that John Wesley cherished imported Chinese tea. However, he denied himself this luxury and settled for what he deemed inferior English tea in order that he might have more to share with the less fortunate. Simple lifestyle changes and spending habits can do the world a lot of good; as the adage goes "live simply so that others may simply live." These are practical examples of how Christ's ambassadors might consciously choose to exhibit Kingdom priorities and values practically in this present age.

The Universal Kingdom of God – Actual

The Kingdom of God is a reality and it is universally present in the world today. The case presented here, which argues that the church has failed at significant points to demonstrate the Kingdom of God, in no way disputes Christ's sovereign right and authority to reign. The calling of the *ecclesia* is primarily to reflect Christ's inaugurated rule in the world, to be a sort of "demonstration plot" for the invisible Kingdom. The church, in the purest sense of the word, also has a universal presence, and there are a number of ways that this movement of God's Spirit is actually exhibiting this Kingdom in the visible realm.

For one thing, God's universal Kingdom is translatable. It has been said that "Islam retains a distinctly Arab orientation...Hinduism has never lost its cultural and

⁴⁵ John Charles Pollock, *John Wesley* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1989), 233.

geographic center in North India”⁴⁶ yet Christianity has been successfully translated into hundreds of languages and cultures. If we could measure the universal impact of the inaugurated Kingdom of God by counting adherents to the Christian faith, the results would be encouraging. “The number of believers in what used to be mission fields now surpasses the number of believers in the countries from which missionaries were originally sent.” According to Winter and Koch, “It took 18 centuries for dedicated believers to grow from 0% of the world’s population to 2.5% in 1900, only 70 years to grow from 2.5% to 5% in 1970, and just the last 30 years to grow from 5% to 11.2% of the world population.”⁴⁷ That means that there are more Christians in the world today than at any other point in human history; 1 out of 9 people claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. The exponential growth of the Christian movement in the East and the Global South is cause for celebration.

However, the Kingdom cannot be so easily reduced to the number of people who identify with the Christian religion. Certainly this number is an indication that many people around the globe have been introduced to the religion that bears Christ’s name, but his Kingdom cannot be scientifically measured. Theoretically, the church is the visible expression of Christ’s reign. However, the reign of Christ, or the universal Kingdom of God on earth, is invisible. It is not something that we can “see” or “touch”, it is not a place we can enter, or a program we can expand or a territory we can enlarge; it is not a membership we can join. According to Darrell Guder, “it is a gift one receives

⁴⁶ Tennent, 3.

⁴⁷ Winter, Hawthorne, Dorr, Graham, and Koch, 509.

and a realm one enters...a domain into which one moves, it meets everyone with God's welcome and Jesus' invitation."⁴⁸

Guder and Barrett remind us of the churches recurrent lure to define the Kingdom in spatial and territorial terms. However, "The church is to embody the reign of God by embracing his authority. We live as the covenant community, a distinctive community spawned by God's reign to show forth its tangible character in human, social form."⁴⁹ The church is a visual and visible witness of this Kingly reign, which is His Lordship over the redeemed: the people He has called out, set apart, and sent forth to incarnate his Kingdom presence in the world.

The missional church lives between the times. It lives between the now and the not yet. The redemptive reign of God in Christ is already present, meaning that the power of God is fully manifested in the world through the gospel under the leading of the Spirit. But the redemptive reign of God is not yet fully complete, as the church looks toward the final consummation when God will remove the presence of sin and create the new heavens and new earth.⁵⁰

Sweet and Viola describe the church as the "means by which Jesus Christ continues to work, to teach, and to establish His sovereign rule in the world. And He will continue to do so until the kingdom of God comes in its fullness, and heaven and earth can be seen by one another again."⁵¹ As members of the Body of Christ we are privileged to participate in and celebrate the diversity of the Kingdom, and to demonstrate the extent to which the victorious reign of Christ has impacted and influenced our world locally, regionally, cross-culturally, and globally.

⁴⁸ Guder and Barrett, 95.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 103.

⁵⁰ Craig Van Gelder, *Rethinking Denominations*, 23-33.

⁵¹ Sweet and Viola, 159.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE KINGDOM OF GOD: A METAPHOR FOR SANCTIFICATION

In this chapter we will continue to examine what the Kingdom of God looks like in the life and experience of fully devoted followers of Christ, and specifically how it might be understood as a metaphor for the doctrine of entire sanctification. David Brush posed the following question in his blog: “Is Entire Sanctification anything other than a synonym for the fruition of the Kingdom of God in the here-and-now? If the Kingdom of God is the redemption of all of creation unto The Creator, how is this different than a doctrine of Entire Sanctification?”¹ Steve Green recorded a song in the ‘80s written by Dottie Rambo² that in essence captures the thesis of this chapter.

When His Kingdom Comes

He will set up His kingdom within you
Filling the void with delight
Taking dominion over selfish desires
Transforming the darkness to light
Transforming the darkness to wonderful light

Oh that I would be
His perfect dwelling place
Oh that my King
Would fill up the empty space
Then flood every room every part,
Sanctify this temple
Then build His throne in my heart

Chorus:

When His kingdom comes; what a difference
When things are in earth; as they are in heaven

¹ David Brush, <http://emergentnazarenes.blogspot.com/2007/11/theological-question-is-entire.html>

² Words and Music by Dottie Rambo & Dony McGuire Copyright 1984 New Kingdom Music (c/o The Benson Company).

When all has been settled
 And my heart is His throne
 Oh what a difference
 When His kingdom comes

A Synthesized Definition of Sanctification

For the purpose of this project, it is advantageous to articulate a definition of sanctification that seeks to synthesize the major traditional views rather than to adding to the debate. There is enough common ground to establish a workable definition that will satisfy our purpose without delving into the various distinctive and non-essential nuances that foster division and disunity. While a dictionary definition is inadequate, it does provide an acceptable starting place: to make holy; set apart as sacred; consecrate; to purify or free from sin.

In the most fundamental sense of the word, those who are born of the Spirit have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. They have been set apart in the mind of God as His own special possession. Sweet and Viola define this work of Grace succinctly as follows:

In Scripture, the word salvation means “deliverance” and includes three tenses: we were saved (justification = salvation from the penalty of sin); we are being saved (sanctification = salvation from the power of sin); and we will be saved (glorification = salvation from the presence of sin). Salvation, then, is Jesus Christ: Christ as our righteousness (past); Christ as our sanctification (present); Christ as our hope of glory (future). The latter will occur when Jesus “will appear a second time.”³

It is necessary to state up front that sanctification is God’s work. It is not merely spiritual achievement attained by human effort. A. B. Simpson said,

It is not the manifestation of our personal virtues, graces or attainments. It is the life of Christ revealed in us. The finest definition of it is given by Paul in 1

³ Sweet and Viola, *Jesus: A Theography*, 294.

Corinthians 1:30, ‘It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.’ Sanctification is thus distinctly recognized not as our improved character but as the in working and the outworking of Christ’s own life in us.⁴

Anthony A. Hoekema also argues this point very well: “It is most important for us to realize that sanctification is not something that we do by ourselves, with our own efforts and in our own strength. Sanctification is not a human activity but a divine gift.”⁵ In too many instances the pursuit of sanctification has deteriorated into little more than a legalistic set of rules to be followed, leading to a self-righteousness that focuses primarily on the efforts of man rather than the influence of the Holy Spirit.

However, overreaction to this drift can result in swinging the proverbial pendulum to such an extreme as to deny man’s responsibility altogether. Again Hoekema is helpful: “According to Scripture, therefore, though sanctification is primarily God’s work in us, it is not a process in which we remain passive but one in which we must be continually active.”⁶ The New Testament is replete with admonitions that support this view. We are commanded to be holy (1 Peter 1:15-16); put on the new self (Ephesians 4:22-24); follow Christ’s example (John 13:14-15); put on the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5-11); Present oneself to God (Romans 12:1-2); put to death the sinful nature (1 Thessalonians 4:3-4); and receive all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19). Sanctification is the work of God in the life of the willing, obedient, surrendered, and cooperative child of God.

It is nearly universally held that initial sanctification is concomitant with justification. While the Wesleyan and Keswick views place a greater emphasis on a crisis

⁴ A.B. Simpson, *Christ Our Sanctifier* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1963), 10.

⁵ John F. Walvoord, Anthony A. Hoekema, Melvin E. Dieter, Stanley M. Horton, and J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 70.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

experience subsequent to regeneration, this distinction is largely a matter of semantics. Crisis does not negate growth in grace; rather, it simply argues that growth is exponentially experienced following crises or significant turning points on one's faith journey. Wesleyan scholar Melvin Dieter acknowledges that the first crisis, regeneration, is experienced simultaneously with *initial* sanctification: "the Spirit's work of regeneration of the heart marks the beginning point of sanctification."⁷

The effect of sanctification is a transformed character. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" It is sometimes implied (at least in Wesleyan circles) there are classes of Christians; those who have been saved, and those who have gone on to sanctification. This conception is inconsistent with the historic position held by Wesleyans. Speaking on behalf of Wesley on this subject, Wesleyan scholar Melvin Dieter, said,

By salvation, Wesley meant not barely, according to the vulgar notion, deliverance from hell, or going to heaven; but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth.⁸

While opinions abound regarding the fruit of sanctification prior to glorification (final sanctification), scholars on all sides of the issue agree that this work of God's grace must necessarily result in conformity to the image of Christ. Holy living is expected "there is no regeneration without reformation"⁹ J. Robertson McQuilkin adds, "The normal Christian overcomes in the battle with temptation, consistently obeys the laws of

⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁸ Walvoord, Hoekema, Dieter, Horton, and McQuilkin, 27.

⁹ A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1986), 45.

God, and grows in self-control, contentment, humility, and courage.”¹⁰ In a similar spirit, W. T. Purkiser said, “The goal of all redemption is to make possible the experience of a pure heart. In the Christian Religion anything less than this is subnormal. Anything other than this is abnormal. This and this alone is normal Christianity.”¹¹

Common Synonyms of Sanctification

While the actual word sanctify is only used a few times, the New Testament abounds with synonymous terms and concepts that reveal aspects of this work of grace, providing a great resource for the student seeking to develop a fuller understanding of the experience and its various phases. Theologians have often used the term sanctification synonymously with words and expressions such as holiness, perfect love, enduement of power, heart purity, and Christian perfection. The way that these qualities are defined as they relate to Sanctification are undoubtedly influenced and informed by one’s theological orientation, but they are instructive as we move toward developing a Kingdom of God metaphor as a synonym for sanctification.

Holiness: According to W. T. Purkiser “the Greek *hagios* (holy) and its related terms occur about 400 times” in the New Testament. “It relates both to things and men as belonging to a holy God; and it relates to persons as they share the character of God or are ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Peter 1:4).”¹² To sanctify or make holy is to set apart to God and from sin. However, the word sin introduces another means of confusion

¹⁰ Walvoord, Hoekema, Dieter, Horton, and McQuilkin, 151.

¹¹ W. T. Purkiser, *Sanctification and Its Synonyms: Studies in the Biblical Theology of Holiness* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1961), 48.

¹² Purkiser, 13-14.

among faithful Christ followers. The degree to which a sanctified Christian is delivered from the power of sin is controversial. If we define sin in its broadest sense (*hamartia*), “to miss the mark,” we cannot deny the inevitability of sinning, even for those who have been sanctified. On the other hand, if we qualify this assertion by claiming that God’s holy people are not free to *willfully* sin against Him, there is considerable agreement. Wesley’s understanding of “sin, properly so called” was profoundly influenced by his mother Susannah who is credited with the following: “Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off the relish of spiritual things, whatever increases the authority of your body over mind, that thing for you is sin.”¹³

Perfect love is another characteristic of the holy life. As a biblical ideal, it is not loving flawlessly, but it is obeying the greatest commandment, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39). Purkiser explains this as “our love kindled and conditioned by the infinite love of God.”¹⁴ Richard Taylor adds to our understanding of this kind of love when he says, “Our love is not perfect unless it includes the enemy as well as the friend for only then is it godlike.”¹⁵ Christ-like love is selfless, sacrificial and unconditional. Jesus powerfully communicated this truth in the parable of the Good Samaritan as recorded in Luke 10 and the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13.

¹³ Susannah Wesley, quoted in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Frank Baker, 25 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 25:166.

¹⁴ Purkiser, 74.

¹⁵ Richard Shelley Taylor, *Exploring Christian Holiness: The Theological Formulation*. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1985), 159.

Love is the greatest defense and witness that Christ's Kingdom ambassadors possess. While Kingdom citizens remain incomplete and imperfect, love overcomes and overwhelms the powers of this dark world and spiritual forces of evil. "Love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). The counter-kingdom is characterized by hatred and deception, but love is the distinguishing mark of the sanctified Christian.

Christian Perfection is a controversial synonym for sanctification that is closely related to Perfect Love. In Matthew 5:48, we are commanded to "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Taylor argues that, "When it is once seen that Matthew 5:48 is in this context of a discussion about the Father's love, we will stop making foolish alibis, and we will cease being embarrassed by this verse. It is not a command to be as perfect as God is in every respect, but in one thing only – to be complete and universal in our love, as God is." Taylor also reminds us that "The qualifier, 'Christian', is a reminder that this experience is not absolute perfection, which belongs to God only. But this perfection, while not defined by outward performance, is defined by our relation to God – a relationship of love and obedience, which in every respect is satisfactory."¹⁶

Purkiser calls Christian Perfection "the only kind of perfection open to frail mortals, the perfection of love...it is not the creation of perfect human beings, but human beings united in perfect love to a perfect Christ."¹⁷ Sanctification does not lead to a perfect execution of the will of God in all things; rather it is a state of grace characterized by a heart that is undivided in love toward God.

Heart cleansing is another commonly used synonym for sanctification. The biblical concept of cleansing from sin is woven throughout the Old and New Testaments

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Purkiser, 63, 71.

as a golden thread. In Hebrews 10:22 “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.” The term “heart” is somewhat ambiguous. It is generally understood to refer to the inner man. “The heart is not a constituent element of human nature, but a descriptive word referring to the real inner quality of the self-life. Heart purity, therefore, is an inner state satisfactory to God.”¹⁸ Cleansing is a vital and fundamental aspect of the Christian concept of redemption. Richard Taylor quoted Juji Nakada, co-founder of the Oriental Missionary Society, who said, “If God cannot change our disposition, wherein does Christianity differ from other religions? Even Buddhism teaches us to suppress the old nature.”¹⁹

Charles Wesley’s hymns are replete with references to Christ’s cleansing blood. John R. Tyson reminds us the “imagery Wesley used to describe this process of cleansing was rich and varied. As we have seen, the terms most often depicted the removal of dirt or filthiness, metaphorically signifying the removal of sin and unrighteousness.”²⁰ As previously acknowledged, the extent of cleansing is debatable among Bible believing Christians; however, everyone agrees that Christ “gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:14).

Enduement of power is an important synonym for sanctification and is worthy of consideration. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you

¹⁸ Taylor, 162.

¹⁹ Ibid., 163.

²⁰ John R. Tyson, *Charles Wesley on Sanctification: A Biographical and Theological Study*. (Grand Rapids, MI: F. Asbury Press, 1986), 136.

will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). “The hallmark of the new dispensation was not *charismata* (such power had been given before Pentecost, Matthew 10:1) but the power for holy living and effective witnessing.”²¹ The disciples, who not many days prior to Pentecost had fled in fear and deserted their Master during his darkest hour, were instructed to wait for the Holy Spirit who would descend upon them and empower them with boldness to testify about the Kingdom. “When the Holy Spirit fills the human heart with His power and presence, He generates the urge to carry out Christ’s command. The converse is also true: The Great Commission cannot be fulfilled without the power of the Spirit.”²²

Spirit-filled Christians are not super Christians, but simply true Christians who have received an endowment of power to obediently fulfill their purpose and calling. “The normal Christian has power not only for godly living but for effective service.”²³ This demonstration of power is a convincing Kingdom witness, and it is by this endowment of power that the Disciples of Christ are enabled to introduce the new world order. Craig VanGelder said, “The redemptive reign of God is about a power encounter. It is about the power of God defeating the power of the evil one. It is about forming a new type of community that lives by this power through the presence of the Spirit.”²⁴

The following components must be integrated as we seek to develop a synthesized, working definition of sanctification: Spirit-filled, fully-devoted followers of

²¹ Taylor, 161.

²² Earle & Mayfield, 262.

²³ Walvoord, Hoekema, Dieter, Horton, and McQuilkin, 151.

²⁴ VanGelder, 83.

Jesus Christ; set apart by and to God, from sin; for the purpose of bringing pleasure to God and demonstrating the power of the Kingdom of God in this world.

Framing the Kingdom Metaphor

Having articulated a working definition for sanctification, we now turn our attention to the task of defining the term kingdom. In an American context where *vox populi vox Dei* (the voice of the people is the voice of God), the Kingdom paradigm is a difficult concept to comprehend. It is, however, a metaphor that is extensively employed throughout Scripture and demonstrates redemptive qualities worthy of this difficult task.

Referring to what he believes to be a colossal misunderstanding of the central theme of the gospels, N. T. Wright argues “the evangelists insist that the kingdom truly was inaugurated by Jesus in his active public career, during the time between his baptism and the cross. That entire narrative is the story of ‘how God became king in and through Jesus.’”²⁵ Myles Munroe states, “The message of the Bible is primarily and obviously about a Kingdom. If you do not understand kingdoms, it is impossible for you to understand the Bible and its message...the true concept of kingdom has been lost, especially since the advent of modern governments...e.g., democracy, socialism, communism, and dictatorships.”²⁶

Fairytales and fables, the tabloids’ construal of the British Royal family, and even Disney World have largely formed the average American’s perception of the word kingdom. Consequently, other synonymous terms may prove beneficial as we seek to

²⁵ Wright, 348.

²⁶ Munroe, 63.

obtain a better understanding; terms like monarchy, sovereignty, and dominion. According to Munroe, “the words dominion or rule are synonymous and derive their meaning from the same root words. The Hebrew: *Malkuth*; and the Greek derivative: *Basileia*. The definition of these words include ‘to rule’, ‘sovereignty’, ‘to reign’, ‘kingdom’, ‘to master’, ‘to be king’, ‘royal rule’, and ‘kingly.’”²⁷ When we refer to the Kingdom of God, we are talking about the Lordship of the Jesus Christ who is sovereign, and possesses the absolute right to rule with infinite power for all eternity; irrefutably and irrevocably.

Myles Munroe’s book *Rediscovering the Kingdom* is helpful as we examine eight “characteristics that are common to all kingdoms.”²⁸ The following attributes demonstrate how the phrase Kingdom of God and Sanctification parallel.

Kingdom Characteristics as Synonyms for Sanctification

The following kingdom components effectively represent the relationship between the Sanctifier and the sanctified, and help to establish the assertion that the phrase Kingdom of God serves as an instructive and effectual metaphor.

King: There can be no kingdom without a king (or queen). For those who have devoted their lives entirely to God, His absolute power is welcomed and embraced; He is Lord and King experientially. “Authority flows from the King and the word of the King is supreme.”²⁹ In sanctification, one has yielded, surrendered his or her life to King Jesus as Savior and Lord. Tozer argues, “There can be no Saviourhood without

²⁷ Ibid., 30.

²⁸ Ibid., 64.

²⁹ Ibid., 65.

Lordship... Christ must be Lord or he will not be Saviour.”³⁰ The sanctified Christ follower subordinates his will to the will of God: “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done.”

Citizens: “People that live under the rule of the king.”³¹ The *ecclesia*, or those who have been called out and set apart to Christ, metaphorically comprise Kingdom citizenship. In Galatians 3:26-28, Paul said, “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” And again in Ephesians 2:19-20 this universal citizenship is affirmed, “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.”

Territory: While earthly kings have a territory, the biblical word *Basileia* refers to a dominion rather than a domain. In keeping with our Kingdom motif, we will entertain Monroe’s definition of a king’s territory; “the domain over which the king exercises total authority.”³² Spiritually speaking, in sanctification this kingdom *territory* is the heart, the inner person, fully devoted to Christ and undivided in love for God. A. W. Tozer says, “In every Christian’s heart there is a cross and a throne, and the Christian is on the throne till he puts himself on the cross; if he refuses the cross he remains on the throne...we

³⁰ Tozer, 83, 86.

³¹ Munroe, 65.

³² Ibid.

want to be saved, but we insist that Christ do all the dying. We remain king within the little kingdom of Mansoul and wear our tinsel crown with all the pride of a Caesar.”³³

N. T. Wright helps us to remember that the dominion of Christ is not limited to “Mansoul”, and argues: “[The] new creation itself has begun...and will be completed. Jesus is ruling over that new creation and making it happen through the witness of his church. The ‘ruler of this world’ has been overthrown; the powers of the world have been led behind Jesus’s triumphal procession as a beaten, bedraggled rabble. And that is how God is becoming king on earth as in heaven.”³⁴

Law: God established a holiness code with His people through Moses written on tablets of stone; the Israelites endorsed the law externally, but their sinful hearts resisted it. “But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises” (Hebrews 8:6). According to Taylor, “the new covenant has as its central genius the change, not of the commandments but of the human heart.” He continues, “A law can be enforced, but the law itself cannot create goodwill; this must come from within...by inward change known as sanctification, this change adjusts the inner man to the standard so that tension is eliminated and conformity can be enjoyed – willingly, happily, and naturally.”³⁵ In Deuteronomy 30:6, God promised one day “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.”

³³ Tozer, 66.

³⁴ Wright, 236.

³⁵ Taylor, 112.

Under the new covenant, we do not disregard the law, but the indwelling Holy Spirit has changed our disposition so that we have the capacity to love God and please Him. When the religious Pharisees tested Jesus, inquiring, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:34-40).

Privileges: “Benefits the king lavishes on faithful citizens.”³⁶ The benefits of the Kingdom of God are innumerable and inestimable. We can only begin to recount the privileges that belong to citizens of this kingdom. We were chosen, called out, set apart, redeemed, reconciled, cleansed, regenerated, justified, pardoned, adopted, sanctified, filled with the Spirit, and promised an abundant meaningful life now and for all of eternity. Jesus expressed the value of this kingdom in parables: Matthew 13:43-46 “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.”

It would be humanly impossible to adequately describe the privileges and benefits that belong to citizens of this kingdom; benefits that are obtainable from the moment of initial sanctification until glorification, and for all eternity.

³⁶ Munroe, 66.

Constitution: “The documented words of the King...expressing the mind and will of the king for his citizens.”³⁷ The constitution of the Kingdom of God is conveyed with clarity and simplicity in the Sermon on the Mount. In the *Beatitudes*, Jesus describes the attributes of citizens of the kingdom; next he taught about kingdom influence using analogies of “salt” and “light.” He articulated kingdom ethics with regard to murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation, and love, differentiating Old Testament standards from the expectations of his soon-to-be inaugurated kingdom. He gave instruction concerning the practice of prayer and fasting. He cautioned against hypocrisy and applauded humility as a befitting posture of the kingdom. Finally, Jesus compared and contrasted two roads, two kinds of prophets, and two kinds of disciples.³⁸ In these three chapters (Matthew 5-7), Jesus delivered his clearest and most articulate teaching regarding the constitution of the coming Kingdom inaugurated through his sinless life, death, and resurrection; and which will be finally consummated at the Second Advent, at the end of the age.

Economy: “The economic system of a kingdom which guarantees each citizen equal access to financial security.”³⁹ Jesus had quite a lot to say about money; the kingdom economy is not about being rich or poor, it is about stewardship. The sanctified Christ follower is to be a faithful manager of his or her resources; time, abilities, opportunities, influence, material possessions, intellect, and health. The guiding

³⁷ Ibid., 65.

³⁸ For a brief summary of the Sermon on the Mount I consulted H. L. Willmington, *The Outline Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), 460-464.

³⁹ Munroe, 67.

economic principle of the kingdom is that trustworthiness and faithfulness will be rewarded.

On one occasion, Jesus “sent them [the 12] out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He told them: ‘take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra shirt’” (Luke 9:2-3). According to Luke 12:22-24, “Then Jesus said to his disciples: ‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap; they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds!’” And in Luke 12:31-32 “But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.”

Social Culture: “This is the cultural aspect that separates and distinguishes the kingdom from all others around it.”⁴⁰ God’s holy people are commanded “do not conform to the pattern of this world” (Romans 12:2). Phillips Translation renders this passage “Do let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold.” We are to be “in” but not “of” the world. Jesus emulated and modeled the importance of interacting with lost people who matter to God as a Kingdom testimony; this is how we function as ambassadors or Kingdom witnesses in this present age. We are participants in the new world order initiated by Jesus Christ.

“This distinction in Kingdom culture is evidenced in the words of Jesus, when He repeatedly said in the book of Matthew, ‘you have heard it said... but I tell you,’ (Matt. 5:21-22) and again, ‘it shall not be so among you’ (Matt. 20:26).”⁴¹ From the call of

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Abraham to the Day of Pentecost, until the *Parousia*, the social culture of God's kingdom is "Therefore, 'Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you'" (2 Corinthians 6:17).

When the Kingdom of God is understood relationally rather than in institutional or even eschatological terms, it functions as a persuasive metaphor for sanctification. The Kingdom of God metaphor emphasizes a vital and continual relationship between Sovereign and subject. It diminishes sterile doctrinal disputes and impotent "past-tense spiritual encounter" testimonies that have monopolized our sanctification conversation. The image-rich language of king, thrones, embassies, and ambassadors may help the church to reignite and rejuvenate this under-preached, misunderstood treasure, promise, and possession. "When His kingdom comes; what a difference!" John Wesley said in his sermon *The Way to the Kingdom*,

This holiness and happiness, joined in one, are sometimes styled in the inspired writings, 'the kingdom of God,' ...and sometimes, 'the kingdom of heaven.' It is termed 'the kingdom of God,' because it is the immediate fruit of God's reigning in the soul. So soon as ever he takes unto himself his mighty power, and sets up his throne in our hearts, they are instantly filled with this 'righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.' It is called 'the kingdom of heaven,' because it is (in a degree) heaven opened in the soul.⁴²

Sanctification as Kingdom Witness

"It is God's will that you should be sanctified" (1 Thessalonians 4:3a). Since our sanctification is important to God, it ought to be important to us. In many contexts, this topic has been misunderstood and misrepresented and sometimes avoided. However, our

⁴¹ Monroe, 67.

⁴² John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*. 3rd ed. Vol. 5. First Series of Sermons. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 80-81.

sanctification is not optional: it is the will of God. It is my contention that resurrecting a biblical Kingdom of God motif as a metaphor for sanctification in our teaching and preaching will facilitate a compelling Kingdom witness.

If you were to ask a member of the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition, “when were you sanctified wholly?” you would probably learn about their past-tense crisis experience at a camp meeting or revival service. What if we were to rephrase the question? “When was Christ enthroned in your life?” and “How are you presently witnessing this power of the Kingdom?”

Sanctified Christ followers are called to be his witnesses in this present age. Leonard Sweet reminds us, “If witness means anything, it is only because there was or is a Witness. The Greek word *marturos* means “witness,” from which we get our word martyr. Martyrs were people who “witnessed,” who put their lives where their lips were.⁴³ Christ followers are witnesses of and witnesses for the King/Kingdom. Or perhaps as expressed by Sweet, we are *with-nesses*, because the auto-Basileia is both in us and with us, and we are called to be the continuation of his incarnation in the world.

We are Kingdom “demonstration plots.” In order for Christ followers to invade our respective cultures with the hope of the Kingdom of God, it will be essential to employ a vocabulary that is less about “my personal experience” and more about our corporate Kingdom “with-ness.” God has not called out and set apart a person: He has sanctified for Himself a people. Together, this community of Kingdom with-nesses has the privilege of incarnating the reign of God by winsome and powerfully demonstrable means.

⁴³ Leonard Sweet, *11: Indispensable Relationships You Can't Be Without* (David C. Cook, Kindle Edition), loc. 285-287.

When Jesus sent the twelve to announce the Kingdom of God, he said, “As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give” (Matthew 10:7, 8). After Pentecost, they received an endowment of power and witnessed with a relentless perseverance and authority.

Citizens of the Kingdom are witnesses of the Kingdom, and our witness must surpass sharing our personal testimony with those who are already convinced. According to Darrell Guder, “The church’s task of announcing the reign of God will mean moving beyond the four walls of the church building, out of the safe group of people who know and love each other, into the public square. The missional church will be in the world with the good news.”⁴⁴ Similarly, Dallas Willard said,

The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its heartbreaking needs, is whether those who, by profession or culture, are identified as “Christians” will become disciples—students, apprentices, practitioners—of Jesus Christ, steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence. Will they break out of the churches to be his Church?⁴⁵

Often, the church is so fearful of the world it “circles the wagons” and retreats from the very environment it was sent to influence. This escapism mentality results in a deficient Kingdom witness. Clearly we want to avoid the tendency to conform to the pattern of this world while not avoiding the world all together. Guder acknowledges the gravitational pull toward worldliness that Christ’s ambassador’s struggle against:

Disciples, like ambassadors, sometimes become captive to the dominant culture into which Christ sends them. This result is only natural since they are asked to become fluent in the ways of the culture in which they reside so that they may

⁴⁴ Guder and Barrett, 137.

⁴⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (HarperOne. Kindle Edition), loc. 171-174.

translate their mission in an intelligible manner. But the disciple or ambassador who has gone native has also lost the clarity of the original mission. For this reason, even experienced ambassadors for God's reign need the regular teaching of the church in order to keep their focus on the message that they have been sent to convey.⁴⁶

The message of the church is the Kingdom of God. The tension that we live with as we are called to invade the kingdom of this world is weighty; the witness of the Kingdom of God hangs in the balance. The Pharisees judged Jesus' motives when he successfully modeled this tension between being in the world but not of the world. He reminded the religious zealots of his day, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). Sometimes God's holy people have evaded this tension altogether. Not unlike the Pharisees, we have erred on the side of caution. As God's sanctified people, we have decidedly identified ourselves by what we have been separated *from* rather than what we have been separated *for*.

Arguably, others have assumed another extreme and have crossed a line by participating in that which is unholy. Ray Dunning warns,

If we put this in the context of mission, which is the *raison d'être* of the church, we can capture the importance of avoiding any lifestyle that compromises the lordship of Christ. To yield to the temptation of acknowledging the priority of worldly values would militate against the witness of the one who professes to love God with undivided love.⁴⁷

Clearly both extremes undermine the mission: On the one hand a rigid separatism that is overly exclusive – on the other, entanglement to the extent of participation. Those living

⁴⁶ Guder and Barrett, 140-141.

⁴⁷ H. Ray Dunning, *Reflecting the Divine Image: Christian Ethics in Wesleyan Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 84.

in submission to King Jesus are reminded in Colossians 3:15, “let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” Dunning explains,

The word translated in the RSV as ‘rule’ carries the meaning of ‘arbitrate’ or ‘umpire.’ The umpire is the one who calls fouls, out of bounds and other infractions of the rules of the game. How does the peace of Christ do this? In the sense that anything that disturbs that ‘peace,’ that relation of communion with God, should be avoided in the Christian life.⁴⁸

Obviously we will fail to demonstrate God’s redemptive reign if we ourselves are captives of the counter-kingdom, the prince of this dark world. The Kingdom of God metaphor will serve a corrective function by reminding the wholly sanctified Christ follower that he/she is not only separated from something, but also set apart for something: Kingdom witnesses compellingly demonstrating God’s redemptive reign.

Craig VanGelder reminds us that,

The church does not possess God’s reign, it is to be possessed by it. This makes the church an agent of the kingdom. Its nature, its very existence, stems from the presence of the kingdom. Its ministry, what it does, is an expression of God’s redemptive work in the world. Its organizational life, how it structures itself, is shaped by its ministry and the power encounter taking place between the kingdoms.⁴⁹

In this chapter I have attempted to demonstrate that followers of Christ receive or enter the Kingdom of God (defined as a present, inaugurated reality) when they are sanctified (initially, fully, and finally). Corporately, those who have submitted to the sovereign rule of Christ provide a visible expression of his power to transform the present age. The witness of the reign of Jesus Christ is the high and holy calling of the *ecclesia*.

The church is a people shaped by the redemptive reign of God. The church is not an end in itself. It has a distinct calling – to demonstrate the reality of God’s redemptive power in the world. It has a unique nature – to live as a fellowship that demonstrates kingdom values and expresses kingdom power. It has a distinct

⁴⁸ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁹ VanGelder, 88.

purpose of carrying out a ministry of participating fully in the redemptive work of God in the world.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Ibid., 89.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCIPLES OF CHRIST: KINGDOM AMBASSADORS

As previously argued in this project, the prevailing and deficient Kingdom theology has produced an anemic discipleship model for the church. Subordinating the importance of the present reign of God to personal eschatological sentiments has undermined Kingdom priorities. Consequently, there is a mounting ambassador crisis: an apparent shortage of people persuasively incarnating the reign of God in the world. In fact, while the number of adherents to the *Christian Religion* is on the increase in many places, it is contended that nominalism is also on the rise. Dallas Willard said that nominal is the new normal.¹ Eddie Gibbs suggests that nominalism happens “when society exerts a greater influence on the church than its own distinctive message... a message centered on the Gospel of the kingdom and the lordship of Christ.”² A Gallup poll determined that 33% of Americans over the age of 18 claimed to be born again Christians. In response to this discernibly optimistic report Patrick Morley said,

This information should grip us with terror. It means that the greatest revival in history has so far been impotent to change society. It’s revival without reformation. It’s revival, which left the country floundering in spiritual ignorance. It’s a change in belief without a corresponding change in behavior.³

It is my contention that the rise in nominal Christianity is a result of superficial and inadequate discipleship practices that are failing to produce transformed lives, which in turn negates effectual Kingdom witness. Richard Foster said,

¹ Willard, loc.1661-1663.

² Eddie Gibbs, *In Name Only: Tackling the Problem of Nominal Christianity* (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Seminary, 1994), 45.

³ Patrick M .Morley, *Walking with Christ in the Details of Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publisher, 1992), 13.

Heaven and earth are on tiptoe waiting for the emergence of a Spirit-led, Spirit-intoxicated, Spirit-empowered people. All of creation watches expectantly for the springing up of a disciplined, freely gathered, martyr people who know in this life the life and power of the kingdom of God.⁴

The task at hand is to define and articulate a discipleship prototype that will result in spiritual formation and the equipping of Christ's followers to effectively introduce the Kingdom of God that is in our midst.

Discipleship: A Working Definition

Searching for an effective definition for discipleship in a context where nominalism is ubiquitous is akin to asking a blind man to describe a sunset. As an example, consider the following definition offered by authors Luter and McReynolds: “the process of learning about Jesus and how to follow him as a committed lifestyle.” They concede, “Still, such a definition does not fully reflect the about-face that is necessary from the pre-Christian pattern of life.”⁵ First of all, this definition assumes that discipleship is post-conversion, a view commonly held by churches and the developers of discipleship curriculum.

As we set out to establish a working definition, it should be stated from the start that the discipleship process begins *pre-conversion*. Through prevenient grace, the Holy Spirit is already removing barriers and preparing the way for the lost to be found, though they are unaware of His leading. Bishop E. P. Nacpil's comments on discipleship are seemingly harmonious with this perspective:

⁴ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 175.

⁵ Boyd Luter and Kathy McReynolds, *Disciplined Living: What the New Testament Teaches About Recovery and Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 20.

The first element to note is that it is Jesus who calls. He is absolutely sovereign in this whole act of calling and making disciples. He takes the initiative...The Johannine Jesus underlines His sovereign initiative in the whole process of disciple-making; ‘*You did not choose me, but I chose you*’ (Jn. 15:16)...The second point to notice is that the call of Jesus is ‘follow me’ (Mk. 2:14).⁶

Jesus did not ask religious people to be his disciples. In fact, the Seven Woes recorded in the 23rd chapter of Matthew provide an unambiguous scrutiny of Jesus’ opinion of religious people. Jesus invited irreligious sinners and simply commanded, “Follow me.” Interestingly, he immediately added, “and I will make you fishers of men.” Clearly it was not Jesus’ intent to merely surround himself with *students*; his followers were expected to begin recruiting other disciples concurrent with becoming disciples themselves. According to Jesus’ example, discipleship is a pre-conversion process of inviting followers to invite followers!

Nacpil integrates this followership component of discipleship with the necessity of relationship:

If the word discipleship is in any way used to denote something general and not a concrete and therefore a concretely filled-out event between Jesus and this particular person, the command ‘follow me’ can only be described as quite meaningless. For the only possible content of the command is that this or that specific person to whom it is given should come to, and follow, and be with, the one who gives it. In this one, and the relationship that it establishes between him and the one he calls, a good deal more is involved. But there is nothing apart from him and this relationship.⁷

This highly relational aspect of Jesus’ model is often discounted in a cultural ethos that regards independence as its most cherished value. In his book, *I Am a Follower*, Sweet militates against this anti-relational sentiment that is so pervasive particularly in Western Christianity:

⁶ Emerito P. Nacpil, *Jesus' Strategy for Social Transformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 100.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

Just as Western culture tends to be highly individualistic, Western Christianity tends to conceive of discipleship in terms of isolated choices, decisions, disciplines, and directions. It's our fall-back way of thinking, our mental default. But the formation of the twelve individual disciples Jesus chose took place in a context of round-the-clock interactions and relationships.⁸

Our working definition of discipleship must promote and foster the developing of a vital relationship with Jesus Christ, in community. Impotent processes have a tendency to elevate information above relationship. Leonard Sweet states this so eloquently: "Jesus is the Truth, for truth is a Person, not a principle. This relational view of truth contrasts starkly with the world's way of thinking and demands more than mere intellectual assent."⁹ Sweet reminds us that one of the defining statements of Jesus was "'follow me.' Not my teachings. Me. And not 'listen to me,' but 'follow me.' In contrast to the other rabbis, Jesus didn't merely invite his students to be attached to his teaching about the Torah. He invited them to be attached to himself."¹⁰

Perhaps we could succinctly define discipleship as *the process whereby followers of Christ are being continually conformed to His image in a communal context.*

Discipleship and Transformation

For disciples, citizens and ambassadors of his Kingdom's reign, conformity to the image of Christ is not optional. M. Robert Mulholland Jr. articulates this truth as follows: "To be followers of Christ is to be persons whose lives, individually and corporately, are lived by a set of values radically different from those of the broken world, persons whose behaviors are shaped by the structures of a different order of being – the kingdom of

⁸ Sweet, *I Am a Follower*, 216.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

God.”¹¹ J. B. Phillips’ translation of Romans 12:2 puts it this way, “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.”¹² And yet, as previously noted, nominalism, Christianity *in name only*, is on the rise. Brandon Hatmaker laments this trend:

We are simply not seeing the fruit of transformation at the rate we might claim, expect, and even hope for. It’s more common to see our discipleship processes create the spiritually arrogant than a transformed people living on mission. We still feel the urge to “go deeper” and “be fed” although we may be in Bible studies three to four times a week. It’s as if we’re spinning our tires with the throttle to the floor, but we’re not going anywhere.¹³

The fruit of transformation is referred to as the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23.

Spiritual fruit is produce, produced by the Spirit. God’s Spirit-filled disciples necessarily live fruitful lives. Consequently, when we evaluate Christian discipleship, we are inspecting fruit. Religion will not produce this fruit. We will argue in this chapter that Christian education will not produce this fruit. Healthy organisms reproduce all by themselves. Paul argued in 1 Corinthians 3:6, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.” Discipleship is the process of planting, watering, grooming, and fertilizing seed. God brings the increase, but we ought to prepare environments that are conducive for growth. Furthermore, we must evaluate the growth regularly. This means we must frequently and even methodically inspect our fruit. Am I more loving, am I more joyful, am I becoming increasingly peaceful, etc. Sweet said,

¹¹ M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 116.

¹² J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English* (HarperCollins, 1962).

¹³ Brandon Hatmaker, *Barefoot Church: Serving the Least in a Consumer Culture* (Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 2011), 103.

What proves whether we are Jesus' disciples or not? Is it our faithful attendance at church services? Is it our tithing record? Is it what we say we are? Not according to Jesus. He says our discipleship is proven by whether or not we bear fruit. And our Lord is not satisfied with a tiny yield of that fruit. Jesus expects an abundant harvest. The fact that fruits and veggies are commonly referred to as produce highlights the idea that trees and plants are intended to produce something worthwhile and nourishing. That's the mark of true discipleship too. The Spirit's actions in our lives are invisible but can be seen by their effects . . . their fruits.¹⁴

The fruit of the Spirit is the supreme test of Discipleship. Conformity to the image of Christ will necessarily produce, *produce*. Again Brandon Hatmaker has astutely observed:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22 – 23). Yet bitterness, an unforgiving spirit, anxiety, and apathy abound. Studies show there is little, if any, difference between Christians and non-Christians regarding addiction, divorce, depression, volunteerism, or giving. This is something that should bother us. This superficiality comes into startling focus when we observe the incongruity between the numbers of people who profess faith in Jesus Christ and the lack of impact on the moral and spiritual climate of our times.¹⁵

In other words, so-called *disciples* are failing miserably as Kingdom witnesses! Our discipleship processes must aim to equip the people of God to become servants rather than consumers. Jesus said, "Follow me...and I will make you fishers of men." We are brought into the Kingdom to introduce others to the King. We will continue to fail to incarnate the reign of God in this present age as long as we define a disciple of Christ as someone who has *asked Jesus into his or her heart and is waiting to go to heaven when they die*. Robert Webber said,

True salvation and Christian discipleship is an obedience to Christ that results in a new life lived in this world. Yes, of course there is a world to come. But first we are called to live under God in this material world, in its structures of relationships—family, political, economic, and social realities—in a redemptive way. An otherworldly Christianity that seeks to escape from this world produces

¹⁴ Sweet, 93.

¹⁵ Hatmaker, 100-101.

Gnostics who fail to demonstrate how a Christian witness affirms life in this world as a good gift of the Creator.¹⁶

Galatians 5:22-23 is the litmus that reliably indicates that we are continually in the process of being re-molded from within. Willard expressed this so well when he said, “The fruit of the Spirit simply is the inner character of Jesus himself that is brought about in us through the process of Christian spiritual formation. It is the outcome of spiritual formation. It is ‘Christ formed in us.’”¹⁷ Biblically defined discipleship necessarily assumes transformation and conformity to Christ. A program that fails to fulfill this objective is woefully inadequate and should not be construed as discipleship at all.

Discipleship and Evangelism

I am convinced that one of the unfortunate consequences of our Evangelical obsession with the term *decision* has led to the ugly divorce between discipleship and evangelism. When discipleship is defined as a post-conversion program of the institutional church, evangelism is inevitably bumped to the pre-conversion slot.

An example of this can be observed in Rick Warren’s “five purposes.” Warren says that the Church exists to fulfill these five purposes:

At Saddleback we use five key words to summarize Christ’s five purposes for his church. Magnify: We celebrate God’s presence in worship. Mission: We communicate God’s Word through evangelism. Membership: We incorporate God’s family into our fellowship. Maturity: We educate God’s people through discipleship. Ministry: We demonstrate God’s love through service. These key words, representing our five purposes, have been incorporated into our mission statement, which reads as follows: ‘To bring people to Jesus and *membership* in

¹⁶ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community* (Baker Publishing Group, Kindle Edition, 2003), 146.

¹⁷ Willard, Loc. 1742-1744.

his family, develop them to Christlike *maturity*, and equip them for their *ministry* in the church and life *mission* in the world, in order to *magnify* God's name.¹⁸

Warren's thesis provides an articulate sampling of how the church has dissected Christ's one imperative, *μαθητευσατε*, "make disciples." In fairness to Warren, an inadequate understanding of discipleship has necessitated his meticulous qualification of the terms he employs. However, if discipleship was properly understood and communicated, then Jesus' simple command, "make disciples" would do; we would understand that the command meant *reproduce fully devoted Christ-followers serving, worshipping, and Kingdom-with-nessing*. The Church of the Nazarene has apparently assumed this position; their somewhat recently renovated mission statement simply says, *Our Mission: To make Christlike disciples in the nations*.

However, when the primary task of evangelism is defined as "getting decisions," then a post-conversion program of discipleship is required to finish the task. But what if discipleship was pre-conversion? What if we did not seek to make converts, but instead we sought to make disciples who make disciples? Robert Webber said,

The Great Commission demonstrates that Jesus did not introduce various programs for evangelism, discipleship, and Christian formation. Instead, following in the tradition of Hebraic holism, Jesus taught that becoming a disciple is a process that takes place in a continuous way in the worship and community life of the church... The unity of the ministries of evangelism, discipleship, and Christian formation continued into the early church, especially the first three centuries.¹⁹

Hence Jesus' last will and testament... "Make disciples" (Matthew 28:18-20). Somewhere along the way the relationship between evangelism and discipleship was severed.

¹⁸ Richard Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub., 1995), 107.

¹⁹ Webber, loc. 24-25.

Robert Webber has formulated a historical statement concerning this separation, and contends that it has created barriers that continue to plague us to the present.

The first blow to the unitive process of conversion came through the conversion of Constantine... While viewing himself as a Christian and practicing prayers in private, Constantine did not submit to the church until the end of his life. He honored the Christians, gave them special privileges, and made an ostensible claim to Christianity without believing, behaving, and belonging in the way established in the first, second, and third centuries... Constantine's conversion appeared to be rote and mechanical, following the rules but missing the Spirit. In this way he modeled a new kind of Christian—one who proclaimed faith but did not have a life of faith within the church.²⁰

Conceivably, the precedent for a nominal Christianity was set as early as the fourth century CE; a Christianity of confession where followership and character transformation was optional at best and unnecessary at worst. Bill Hull stated perhaps a bit facetiously, “The common teaching is that a Christian is someone who by faith accepts Jesus as savior, receives eternal life and is safe and secure in the family of God; a disciple is a more serious Christian active in the practice of the spiritual disciplines and engaged in evangelizing and training others.”²¹ Willard suggests that this dichotomy is regrettable:

If you preach a gospel that has only to do with the forgiveness of sin..., you will be as we are today: stuck in a position where you have faith over here and obedience and abundance over there, and no way to get from here to there because the necessary bridge is discipleship. If there is anything we should know by now, it is that a gospel of justification alone does not generate disciples. Discipleship is a life of learning from Jesus Christ how to live in the Kingdom of God now, as he himself did.²²

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 33.

²² Willard, loc. 984-985.

A. W. Tozer expressed his dismay in this way: “a notable heresy has come into being throughout evangelical Christian circles—the widely accepted concept that we humans can choose to accept Christ only because we need him as Savior and that we have the right to postpone our obedience to him as Lord as long as we want to!”²³ Tozer, along with these others, maintain that this belief in an undisciplined disciple is absurd and even *heretical*.

Willard addressed this increasingly popular, and yet deceptive, concept that I can get just enough of Jesus to save my skin (eternal health insurance), by coining the phrase “vampire Christians.” This describes those who in effect say to Jesus, “I’d like a little of your blood, please. But I don’t care to be your student or have your character. In fact, won’t you just excuse me while I get on with my life, and I’ll see you in heaven.”²⁴

When evangelism is viewed as a stand-alone event or experience, the church has a tendency to concentrate on inviting decisions rather than making disciples. We record and report conversions and baptisms but we have no metric or means of quantifying the process of discipleship: a process that is admittedly difficult to measure. Perhaps unwittingly, we have advocated an optional spiritual formation, leaving the Kingdom of God without a “demonstration plot” in the world.

²³ A. W. Tozer, *I Call It Heresy* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, 1974), 5.

²⁴ Willard, loc. 340-341.

Discipleship and Christian Education

Another question that emerges out of the divorce between evangelism and discipleship is what do we do with discipleship? It is often perceived as discretionary and presented as post-conversion: something only extremists pursue. Willard asserts,

For at least several decades the churches of the Western world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. One is not required to be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship... So far as the visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, discipleship clearly is optional.²⁵

Discipleship is generally offered as an elective educational program, and converts are encouraged to enroll. It is nearly always discussed as a post-conversion enterprise. Mulholland affirms that this is the prevailing view, “For many Christians, the quest for the deeper life in Christ is viewed as a discipline for the dedicated disciple, a pursuit for the particularly pious, a spiritual frill for those who have the time or inclination, a spiritual fad for trendy Christians.”²⁶ Jim Putman says that discipleship has been reserved for those who “expect to be Biblically educated, and this is often (in their minds) the meaning of ‘becoming a mature disciple.’ The hope is that the education will translate to Christian behavior.”²⁷

The very word discipleship is commonly used synonymously with Christian education, and is rarely viewed as a journey encompassing and synchronizing calling, believing, growing, and reproducing. But, obviously, the increasing problem of nominalism is an indication that “book smarts” will not necessarily lead to changed

²⁵ Ibid., Willard, loc. 201-203.

²⁶ Mulholland, 23.

²⁷ Jim Putman, Bob Harrington, and Robert Coleman, *DiscipleShift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Zondervan, Kindle Edition), loc. 300-302.

hearts. As Leonard Sweet has cunningly coined, “Information does not always lead to ‘in-formation.’”

Dallas Willard explains that “The word “disciple” occurs 269 times in the New Testament. ‘Christian’ is found three times and was first introduced to refer precisely to disciples of Jesus—in a situation where it was no longer possible to regard them as a sect of the Jews.”²⁸ In other words, “Christian” and “disciple” were synonymous terms in the first century. Somewhere along the way spiritual growth came to play second fiddle to the priority of Christian education. According to Mary Vandenberg, this was certainly not the position held by Bonhoeffer, who tied together:

Justification and sanctification, as well as faith and obedience, always defining the concepts in terms of their impact on human behavior. In an age where theology had become an academic discipline with little relevance to the life of the church, Bonhoeffer chose to shape his theological propositions in a way that informs Christian practice.²⁹

It could be argued that we continue to live in such an age, where theology is primarily an academic discipline. Bonhoeffer did not talk about discipleship in terms such as “home Bible study” or “Sunday school” – programs designed exclusively for those who have been saved (by reciting the sinner’s prayer). For him, discipleship was not optional or trivial; it was the gospel:

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock... It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ to which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.³⁰

²⁸ Willard, loc. 193-195.

²⁹ Mary Vandenberg, “Bonhoeffer's Discipleship: Theology for the Purpose of Christian Formation.” *Calvin Theological Journal* 44, no. 2 (2009): 333-349.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 158.

Bonhoeffer referred to grace that saves but does not sanctify as “cheap grace... something we bestow on ourselves... Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.”³¹

It is a rather solemn fact that the translation of the word *witness* in our English Bible is derived from the Greek term *martureo* (from which we get the word martyr). The call to be Christ’s Kingdom witnesses is a costly one. Andrew Root resonates with Bonhoeffer’s “costly discipleship” and laments our ineffectual conception of it:

We equate carrying our cross with raking the leaves or exercising, something that should be done, and in the end is good for us, but is nevertheless hard to do. Christians are those who live moral lives in a world where moral pursuits are not rewarded. So, discipleship becomes not lying to get a better price, not drinking or having sex in high school, claiming that you go to church in a secular environment, or hanging a piece of Christian symbolism in your work cubicle. This, we imagine, is carrying our cross; this is discipleship. But this is not discipleship. This is benign at best, and obnoxious at worst, Christian moralism. To be a disciple is to be one who follows Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ can only be found in death.³²

VandenBerg argues, “For Bonhoeffer the call to discipleship, which he associates with justification, entails action. The disciple is not to simply say, ‘Yes, I will be your disciple’; she is expected to *do* something. She is expected to follow. This doing involves a radical step into a whole new life. Former things are left behind; they are completely given up. Grace, costly grace, is primary in both the call and the commandment.”³³

Too often Bible studies and Christian educational programs have substituted costly discipleship. Ultimately, these are designed to make disciples of programs,

³¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer and John W. De Gruchy, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 158.

³² Andrew Root, *The Promise of Despair: The Way of the Cross as the Way of the Church*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010), 100-101.

³³ VandenBerg, 342.

institutions, and us. Much of Christian education has become an end unto itself and has produced followers for the creators of the curriculum and its presenters rather than for Jesus Christ. In the name of discipleship we have created catechisms and curricula designed to merely indoctrinate.

Over the years, I have been appalled by the number of church guests inquiring on their first visit about our position concerning eternal security, gifts of the spirit, and a host of other secondary, divisive subjects that have little to do with what it means to incarnate the Kingdom of God. These are folks who display a shameful ignorance of primary matters, yet they have been schooled in secondary, peripheral debates *and* warned to avoid churches that do not share their narrow, sectarian opinions. This is discipleship at its worst! Discipleship ought to be the means and process by which Kingdom citizens are equipped to be effective ambassadors and Kingdom *with*-nesses in this present age.

Discipleship = Spiritual Formation: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Mulholland calls this counter cultural phenomenon the “great reversal”:

Being conformed goes totally, radically against the ingrained objectification perspective of our culture. Graspers powerfully resist being grasped by God. Manipulators strongly reject being shaped by God. Controllers are inherently incapable of yielding control to God. Spiritual formation is the great reversal: from being the subject who controls all other things to being a person who is shaped by the presence, purpose and power of God in all things.³⁴

This “great reversal” is the high and holy calling of the church. The calling of Kingdom citizens is to persuasively and compellingly model this discipleship ethos before a watching world. James Wilhoit is spot on when he unapologetically declares:

³⁴ Mulholland, 27.

Spiritual formation is the task of the church. Period. It represents neither an interesting, optional pursuit by the church nor an insignificant category in the job description of the body. Spiritual formation is at the heart of its whole purpose for existence. The church was formed to form. Our charge, given by Jesus himself, is to make disciples, baptize them, and teach these new disciples to obey his commands. The witness, worship, teaching, and compassion that the church is to practice all require that Christians be spiritually formed...the fact remains that spiritual formation has not been the priority in the North American church that it should be.³⁵

Wilhoit's accusation against the contemporary North American church is justified. One reason we have failed to make the Great Commission a priority is because we have succumbed to the pressure of consumerism, allowing it to derail the mission. Consumers attend churches that cater to their personal needs and preferences. Consequently, denominations and local churches have reacted to this outcry by developing attractional programs. Discipleship is the "great reversal" – it's not about the consumer: it's about self-denial, surrender, and submission to the sovereign reign of God.

Discipleship and Discipline

Spiritual formation is the goal of discipleship. We are continually being formed and conformed to the image of Christ as we submit to His Lordship and as we practice the disciplines of the faith that nurture our souls and foster a greater love for Him. In the practice of the historical spiritual disciplines, one finds nearly two dozen keys to spiritual formation (depending on who is counting).

The disciplines enable us to "practice the presence of God," as exquisitely expressed by Brother Lawrence, the seventeenth-century lay brother from a Carmelite Monastery in Paris. Spiritual disciplines are a means of grace, through which Christ

³⁵ James C. Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 15-16.

forms those living in submission to him according to his good pleasure. Mulholland said, “Spiritual formation as ‘being conformed’ will reveal that God is the initiator of our growth toward wholeness and we are to be pliable clay in God’s hand.”³⁶ Chris Shirley describes how the exercise of spiritual disciplines impacts practitioners:

Disciples develop an abundant life in Christ as they worship—corporately and personally—and as they spend time reading, meditating upon, and memorizing the Word of God. The discipline of prayer enriches the intimacy of the disciple’s relationship with Christ and attunes his heart to the will of the Father. These and other formative disciplines change the inner man and develop Christ-like character within the heart of the disciple.³⁷

Dallas Willard says, “Experimental, prayerful implementation of solitude, silence, fasting—and other appropriate practices, such as service, fellowship, worship, and study (there is no such thing as a complete list of spiritual disciplines)—will certainly liberate us into the riches of Kingdom living.”³⁸ And yet, there is very little discussion regarding the value of discipline in our collective discipleship conversation. These keys to intimacy with and conformity to Christ have seemingly disappeared with the desert fathers.

But Jesus “calls us to share his practices in sustaining his own relationship to the Father. Indeed, these practices—of solitude, silence, study, service, prayer, worship—are now the places where we arrange to meet regularly with him and his Father to be his students or disciples in Kingdom living.”³⁹ The disciplines that Jesus observed in his own relationship with the Father provide for the present-day disciple the best possible example. Since a disciple is a “learner” or “student” or “follower” of the Master, then we

³⁶ Mulholland, 16.

³⁷ Chris Shirley, “It Takes a Church to Make a Disciple: An Integrative Model of Discipleship for the Local Church” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 50, no. 2 (2008): 215.

³⁸ Willard, loc. 680-684.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, loc. 1367-1369.

ought to take our cues from him. Disciples of Christ are imitators of Christ: we are his apprentices, and the example he left us is one characterized by the celebration of discipline.

Dallas Willard contends that historically evangelicals have resisted “Christ as teacher” in a radical reaction to those who emphasize the humanity of Christ to the exclusion of his deity.

We have lost discipleship largely because, in the evangelical tradition, we have lost Christ as Teacher. The idea of Christ as Teacher no longer means much, if anything at all, to evangelicals. This has historical roots in the modernist/fundamentalist controversies of the past century. In those controversies, fundamentalists and conservatives began to understand talk of Christ as Teacher as code for ‘he is just a man.’ And it was, in fact, often a way of omitting the divinity of Christ. There arose an inward arming against this idea of Christ as Teacher. But of course, if you don’t have a teacher, you can’t have any students or disciples. We become mere spectators and consumers of holy things, not participants in the life Jesus is now living on earth, and we lose meaningful discipline.⁴⁰

Christ as our supreme example and teacher modeled spiritual disciplines as a means of intimacy with the Father. Jesus’ bond with his disciples was highly relational and practical, which he effectively demonstrated for them and for us. Today’s disciples must rediscover and emulate his pattern. Again, Willard stated,

Character is formed through action, and it is transformed through action, including carefully planned and grace-sustained disciplines. To enter the path of obedience to Jesus Christ—intending to obey him and intending to learn whatever I have to learn in order to obey him—is the true path of spiritual formation or transformation.⁴¹

Our definition of the Kingdom deeply affects our understanding and practice of discipleship. When Kingdom terminology is construed as the work and programs of the institutional church, it is plausible to conceive discipleship in terms of teaching, training,

⁴⁰ Willard, loc. 2463-2469.

⁴¹ Ibid., loc. 1026-1028.

and equipping church (*kirche*) members to do and promote churchy things. However, when we define Kingdom as the authoritative and present reign of God in the world but not of the world, discipleship takes on an entirely different meaning. It is the process of preparing Christ's ambassadors to participate in and incarnate his universal reign.

Summary

In this chapter, a disciple is described and identified as a follower of Jesus Christ on a transformational and incarnational journey. According to this meaning, discipleship is not post-conversion project; it is the integration of calling and conformity to the image of God so that the disciple might effectively and visibly demonstrate the power of Christ's invisible yet infinite rule.

The exercise of spiritual disciplines resulting in the continuous growth of spiritual fruit is the most effective but, by admission, not the most efficient, transformation process. Institutional shortcuts by way of Christian educational programs have been attempted *ad nauseum*. In the end, it is observable that more information does not necessarily lead to transformation. Jesus simply commanded, "Make disciples" and he left us an inefficient and uneconomical model to follow. His counter-cultural "great reversal" is the only valid means of equipping Kingdom witnesses in this age. We call this process discipleship.

CHAPTER SIX: IMPLEMENTING A KINGDOM OF GOD DISCIPLESHIP MODEL IN A LOCAL CHURCH CONTEXT

In my introduction to this dissertation, I stated, *an egocentric eschatology (preoccupation with what happens to the individual at the moment of death) has unwittingly trumped the importance of incarnating the Kingdom of God in this present world. It is my assertion that a better understanding of Kingdom of God theology and the promotion of its priority will inspire Christian discipleship leading to reformation and renewal in the church.* This is undeniably a bold declaration; one that I will attempt to defend in this concluding chapter.

Cursing the Darkness: Summary of Conclusions

Few serious churchmen deny the current discipleship crisis in the Western church. The present-day need for renewal and revival is conspicuous. Nominalism is on the rise, and our existing discipleship model (post-conversion Christian education) has proven ineffectual. Reaction to the discipleship dilemma has led to the emergence of the Parachurch phenomenon. Robert Webber said, “Twentieth-century evangelicalism failed to develop any patterns of ministry that integrated the various disciplines of Christian formation into a coherent whole. Instead, it developed parachurch movements that sought to fill the void left by the traditional church.”¹

Parachurch groups by the hundreds have emerged out of the ashes of an apparently apathetic Church. These organizations have sought to introduce the reign of God in countless ways. There are groups that concentrate on the unique challenges facing

¹ Webber, *Ancient Future Evangelism*, 33.

men, women, children, college students and prisoners. There are ministries for the homeless, the refugee, the poor, and victims of domestic violence. Some have focused on family, marriage, and stewardship. Others promote discipleship, evangelism, and world missions. It seems that wherever the institutional church has failed to incarnate the Kingdom of God, parachurch organizations have come to the rescue. Yet, their valiant efforts have often been as impotent as the institution they came alongside of: an unfortunate example of the blind leading the blind.

Several years ago, I had a conversation with former leader of a national men's movement. He discussed the results of a thorough evaluation his organization underwent following a decade of arena events, conferences, and massive production and distribution of curriculum designed for use in the local church. The outcomes indicated that having invested ten years and many millions of dollars, there was no appreciable impact in the church or the culture at large. In fairness, there are some things that are not scientifically quantifiable; however, Robert Webber raises a valid concern, "There has been a noticeable lack of any attempt to put into place a process that brings all these elements together in the ministry of the local church."²

There is an increasing awareness that the *ecclesia* (of the Western World) is inadequately incarnating the Kingdom of God in the twenty-first century. However, as the old expression goes, *it's better to light a candle than curse the darkness*. We recognize the problem, and we know where we want to go, but we do not know how to get there from here. William Temple said, "I am reminded of the Englishman in Ireland who asked an Irishman, 'Which way to Roscommon?' 'Is it Roscommon you want to go

² Webber, 35.

to?’ said the Irishman. ‘Yes,’ said the Englishman, ‘that’s why I asked the way.’ ‘Well,’ said the Irishman, ‘if I wanted to go to Roscommon, I wouldn’t be starting from here.’”³

So, how did we get here? Throughout this project, I have identified several missteps that have led to the derailment of the churches mission and have undermined its effectiveness: namely, a deficient interpretation of the terms *Kingdom of God, Church and Discipleship*.

Kingdom of God: When you consider the numerous and diverse ways this metaphor is used, it is no wonder there is so much confusion associated with it. Author Timothy Keller explains why he chose to avoid the phrase Kingdom of God in his writing of the book *Generous Justice*, as follows,

I have not done so for several reasons. One is that there is so little consensus among Christian thinkers about the precise meaning of the term. Most agree that God’s kingdom is his redemptive reigning power, that it was inaugurated by Jesus at his first coming into the world and will be brought to completion at his second coming. But as to the exact nature of that kingdom and how it manifests itself today there is much disagreement. Some understand it more individualistically, that it is a spiritual realm we enter when we are converted, so that now God is ruling in our hearts and bringing about changes in our lives. Others understand it more corporately. They see the kingdom as a set of new social arrangements, or as the healing of broken relationships between people of different classes and races. Those who take this view believe the kingdom of God is a way that God brings about changes not just in individual lives, but in the world and society. They believe, for example, that when Christians help the poor, they are therefore doing ‘kingdom work,’ but others would disagree with them, and would insist that only evangelizing and discipling—building up the Body of Christ—is ‘kingdom work.’ An overlapping issue is the debate about the relationship of the present and future worlds.⁴

³ William Temple, *Excerpts from Christianity and Social Order*: Richard J. Foster and James Smith Bryan, *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 251.

⁴ Timothy J. Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, Penguin Group USA, Kindle edition, 2010), loc. 2311.

Keller's decision to avoid Kingdom terminology is reasonable and justifiable; confusion related to Kingdom verbiage is problematic, particularly in a democracy where the concept is shrouded in mystery. The churches Kingdom theology is ambiguous and it is complicated by our cultural and national conception of the term, which, as we have already established, fails to adequately capture the New Testament meaning of *Basileia*.

Kingdom of God vernacular will continue to be a source of frustration, as it would be impossible to impose an improved definition on the universal Christian movement. However, in the local church context we can implement language that reflects the *Basileia tou Theou* more precisely. In the same way the *Amplified Bible* inserts multiple synonyms in order to expound on the meanings of key words, pastors and teachers in the local church can introduce *Basileia*, and/or its literal translation whenever they come across the phrases Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven in the New Testament. This painstaking and arguably inefficient process of re-learning and culturally adapting the Biblical word *Basileia* is defensible. Christ followers are called to be his (Kingdom) witnesses, advocates, and ambassadors in the world: if we continue to loosely define Kingdom, how will Kingdom witnesses witness? This grassroots proposal may not seem very economical on the surface, but neither is the cost of discipleship. Salvaging the Kingdom of God metaphor and redeeming Kingdom theology is essential to the success of the Church's mission in the world.

Church: It is conceivable that few words in the English dictionary have been more misunderstood or misinterpreted than the word church. In the purest sense of the word, we define the Church as the universal gathering of people whom God has called out, set apart and sent forth as ambassadors and witnesses of/for Christ's inaugurated

reign. Tragically, many churches fall short of this ideal. Far too many churches seemingly exist to entertain, educate, and nurture religious people. Extravagant program menus are routinely offered to members for their personal enrichment and spiritual growth.

Andy Stanley suggests that, “all programming was originally created as a means to an end. The problem, as we’ve seen, is that over time leaders forget the end because they’ve fallen in love with the means”⁵ Leaders justify the means because they are convinced that their programs are producing growing, contagious Christians who will eventually be unleashed as Kingdom witnesses in society. The evidence reveals something else; our programs are merely producing a more educated membership. Again Stanley astutely observed,

Knowledge alone makes Christians haughty. Application makes us holy...If you want a church full of biblically educated believers; just teach what the Bible says. If you want to make a difference in your community and possibly the world, give people handles, next steps, and specific applications. Challenge them to do something. As we’ve all seen, it’s not safe to assume that people automatically know what to do with what they’ve been taught. They need specific direction.⁶

Constituents of member-driven churches have cut their spiritual teeth on programs designed around and for them. When these consumers are challenged to mentor others they cry foul! After many years of coddling they still feel ill-equipped to serve. Like spiritual infants longing to be fed, they seek out churches that promise to meet their perceived needs (Hebrews 5:12-14). For too long the church’s target audience has been her membership; when overseers endeavor to shift from an inward to an outward focus, they encounter stiff resistance. Consumerism has created an irresistible gravitational pull toward self-centeredness. John Kaiser said,

⁵ Stanley, *Deep & Wide*, loc. 3391.

⁶ *Ibid.*, loc. 2097.

If we fail to put both intention and resources behind the mission of serving others before serving ourselves, we will not escape the gravitational force of inwardness. Self-centered behavior is the human condition, and it cannot be overcome without submission to divine priorities and power.⁷

Thom Rainer recommends streamlining member-centered programs. He advocates a simple church model, suggesting that, “big and expanding menus are not producing vibrant churches. The conclusion: fast-food spirituality is not healthy. In fact, the large and fast menu approach to ministry is killing our churches.”⁸

Our members rarely see it that way. They believe the church is obligated to provide for their personal contentment and happiness, and when the members are not happy, their pastors swiftly reinstate the status quo. Pastors function as chaplains whose primary work is “hatching, matching, and dispatching.” They are expected to maintain tradition, manage programs, and provide encouragement and support for the membership. The late A. W. Tozer said,

If the church in the second half of [the twentieth] century is to recover from the injuries she suffered in the first half, there must appear a new type of preacher. The proper, ruler-of-the-synagogue type will never do. Neither will the priestly type of man who carries out his duties, takes his pay and asks no questions, nor the smooth-talking pastoral type who knows how to make the Christian religion acceptable to everyone. All these have been tried and found wanting. Another kind of religious leader must arise among us. He must be of the old prophet type, a man who has seen visions of God and has heard a voice from the Throne. When he comes (and I pray God there will not be one but many) he will stand in flat contradiction to everything our smirking, smooth civilization holds dear. He will contradict, denounce and protest in the name of God and will earn the hatred and opposition of a large segment of Christendom.⁹

⁷ John Kaiser, *Winning On Purpose: How To Organize Congregations to Succeed in Their Mission* (Convergence Ebook Series, Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition. 2008.), locs. 499-501.

⁸ Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church* (B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition, 2010), 200.

⁹ A. W. Tozer, quoted by Frank Viola and George Barna. *Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Barna Books. Kindle Edition. 2008), locs. 2426-2432.

Courageous overseers who measure up to Tozer's job description are the exception to the rule. There is intense pressure to perform from above, below, and within, and to accommodate the opinions and preferences of the church's constituency. In our consumer-driven culture, the pastor is viewed as an employee of the institution, members are the customers, and the customer is always right. The notion that "membership has its privileges" is an inevitable consequence of the democratization of the church.

Obviously not everyone agrees that the church exists solely for the gratification of its members. Paul Borden said,

God did not design the church of Jesus Christ for Christians. Rather, we believe that God designed the church to mobilize Christians to attack the gates of hell. In other words, the church is not to be a place of safety for believers but rather a gathering place to accomplish mission. This is the biggest issue facing the church of Jesus Christ in the United States and in cultures similar to the United States. Most Christians believe their congregations exist for them.¹⁰

I will never forget the day I learned firsthand the gravity of religious conviction behind congregational autonomy. I was holding a ladder for a deacon who was changing a florescent tube in a light fixture. I was preaching as he was working. I began to wax eloquent on the subject of the church as a theocracy as opposed to democracy. He came down from the ladder so fast that I thought for a moment he had fallen! In a loud voice and with a red face he educated this young whippersnapper in the ways of congregationalism. "We are a democracy," he stated. "We have a president, a vice president and a treasurer...!" I learned that day that the voice of the people is the voice of God (*Vox Populi, Vox Dei*). As I recall, that son-of-a-charter-member did not survive my five-year tenure. The day came when his opinion did not prevail. Consequently, he voted

¹⁰ Paul D. Borden, *Assaulting the Gates: Aiming All God's People at the Mission Field* (Abingdon Press, Kindle Edition, 2009), 40-41.

with his feet and joined another congregationally governed church in a neighboring community.

Surely this self-governing, member-focused, insider mentality is not what Jesus had in mind when he predicted a prevailing church. Borden stated it this way,

Jesus Christ said that he would build his church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. Therefore the purpose of the church is basically to make sure that the Evil One, who because of sin and evil holds most of the world hostage, does not win. The church of Jesus Christ was designed to depopulate the Evil One's zip code by constantly making new disciples.¹¹

Keith Drury reminds us that “although some churches use congregational votes as a way of discerning God’s will, the church is not a democracy; it is run by the Holy Spirit...No one should ever be on the losing side in a church decision, except the Devil.”¹²

The mission of the church is God’s prerogative, not the result of congregational preference. It is difficult to maintain a posture of submission to the King in a democratic setting where the values, mission, and direction of the church are assumed to be the right of the majority or, in many cases, the loud and persuasive minority. Kaiser suggests,

The squeaky wheel gets the grease, and if there is one spiritual gift that all congregations have, it is the gift of squeaking with tongues. Why don't we ever sing my favorite songs? Why didn't someone visit me when I was sick? Why don't we have a children's club for my third grader? However, no one will ever march down the street from the neighborhood, pound on the pastor's office door, and demand, “Why haven't you started making disciples of Jesus Christ on my block?!”¹³

In a previous chapter we articulated the distinction between church as *kirche*, (meetinghouse, denomination, membership) and *Ecclesia* (the called out ones). The task

¹¹ Ibid., 100.

¹² Keith W. Drury, *There Is No I in Church: Moving Beyond Individual Spirituality to Experience God's Power in the Church* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Pub. House, 2006), 79.

¹³ Kaiser, locs. 495-499.

of persuading all of Christendom to re-define the word church according to its purest New Testament meaning is clearly beyond the scope or intention of this project. As Darrell Guder stated, the church is culturally recognized as “a place where certain things happen...a vendor of religious services and goods.”¹⁴ Since this is how the word is nearly universally understood, any attempt to reinvent the word is inadvisable. However, when we are referring specifically to the *Ecclesia* (the called out ones), we ought to employ biblically consistent terminology.

To some degree this approach is already being practiced. For example, the Pauline metaphor, “Body of Christ” is commonly used in an effort to distinguish between the church as *kirche* and the church as *Ecclesia*. This language is preferable and scriptural; however, it has become so familiar and over used that the distinction is scarcely recognizable. For many, the “Body of Christ” language simply implies, *all church members, irrespective of denominational affiliation*.

Just as the Greek word *Basileia* lost meaning in translation, the word *Ecclesia* has also been poorly interpreted. The church (properly so called) is a missional community comprised of Christ’s witnesses (with-nesses) and missionaries. It is a community of those whom God has called out, set apart and sent forth to incarnate His *Missio Dei*. Narrowing our definition of the *Ecclesia* in this way is potentially revolutionary. According to this distinction, it is plausible that every church contains an *Ecclesia*. In other words, within every visible and institutional gathering there exists a company of Spirit-filled Christ followers: those who have embraced the call to serve as missional agents and Kingdom with-nesses in their communities and beyond.

¹⁴ Guder and Barrett, 80-84.

Discipleship: This is the final term we will revisit in this summary of conclusions.

It has been demonstrated that discipleship ought to be understood as a pre-conversion process, encompassing both initial and progressive sanctification, facilitating conformity to the image of Christ. Frank Viola and George Barna summarize the meaning of discipleship very nicely:

True discipleship is about bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God based on the development and activation of Christlike character. True discipleship is knowing Jesus Christ and allowing Him to live His life in us. It's unfortunate that we have made Christian discipleship an academic exercise as well as an individual pursuit. Across the country we have defined 'success' in spiritual formation in terms of the quantity of knowledge received and retained. We often measure this in terms of programs or courses of study that have been completed. We have lost sight of the authentic aim of discipleship in favor of impractical, passive outcomes that do not reshape who we are and how we live.¹⁵

The one imperative in the great commission as recorded in Matthew 28:19-20 is *μαθητευσατε*: “make disciples.” There are also three participles, *πορευθεντες*: “going” – *βαπτιζοντες*: “baptizing” – *διδασκοντες*: “teaching.” Literally, *as you are going, baptizing, and teaching... make disciples!* Program-driven congregations do a lot of going, baptizing, and teaching, but unfortunately, very little disciple making. Bill Hull has astutely observed, “The Great Commission has been worshipped, but not obeyed. The church has tried to get world evangelization without disciple making.”¹⁶ Jesus’ methodology is perceived as uneconomical by the Western Churches evangelistic standards. We prefer large attractational gatherings where prospects are invited to “invite Jesus into their hearts” *en masse*. The past century produced a significant number of internationally recognized evangelists from around the world. Extraordinary results led contemporary evangelists to largely dismiss the model prescribed by Jesus. His pattern

¹⁵ Viola and Barna, loc. 2560-2564.

¹⁶ Hull, *The Complete Book on Discipleship*, 23.

appeared inefficient in comparison to modern evangelistic practices. However, in an enlightening article entitled *Seven Principles of Biblical Discipleship*, David DeWitt relates an interesting perspective:

In one year, an evangelist reaching 1,000 people a day would reach 365,000 people. Someone discipling one person a year, who reproduces that with one other person a year, would reach two people. In ten years, an evangelist reaching 1,000 people a day would reach 3,650,000 people. Someone discipling one person a year, who reproduces that with one other person a year, would reach 1,024 people. In 25 years, an evangelist reaching 1,000 people a day would reach 9,125,000 people. Someone discipling one person a year, who reproduces that with one other person a year, would reach 33,554,423 people.¹⁷

This intriguing algorithm confirms the model proposed in the New Testament and contradicts the notion that the method commanded by Jesus is somehow uneconomical. Furthermore, this methodology is far more compatible with the Great Commission imperative: *make disciples*. We are commanded to reproduce followers of Jesus, which is the product of relationship and rarely the result of an emotional response to an invitation. This dramatic example of the exponential power of duplication demonstrates the wisdom in the Lord's initial command "follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Evangelism and discipleship are not mutually exclusive; making disciples is evangelism at its best.

The challenge before us is the materialization and implementation of a discipleship process while avoiding the tendency to merely craft another impotent program. Rainer and Geiger recognize this inclination: "In many churches the original tools for life change have created too much clutter. Instead of uniting, they divide focus. The programs have become ends in themselves. Most churches need an extreme

¹⁷ Dr. David A. DeWitt, "Seven Principles of Biblical Discipleship" Relational Concepts Inc. <http://www.relationalconcepts.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=vk8IFGdozJ4=&tabid=73> (accessed November 15, 2013).

makeover.”¹⁸ We cannot expect to see a new kind of disciple emerge from the same old information transfer model. “This faulty premise assumes that the only thing lacking is that church folk do not know enough...these churches produce a bunch of Bible study junkies who sit in the warehouse with yet another workbook.”¹⁹ According to Stanley, these churches assume:

Thinking right. Believing right. Seeing the world through God’s eyes. Those are catalysts for change. But at the end of the day, its application that makes all the difference. Both Jesus and his brother James could not have been any clearer on this point. We are all familiar with James’ declaration that faith without works is dead. What is sometimes overlooked is that he defines for us in a preceding verse what he means by dead. There he declares that faith without works is useless. In other words, it’s useless to know something if you don’t know what to do with it. Or more to his point, it’s useless to know it if you have no intention of doing anything with it.²⁰

The production of spiritual fruit is the work of the Holy Spirit, but the disciple engages in the process by surrendering to Christ’s sovereign rule, removing obstacles and barriers that clutter our souls, and developing habits and disciplines that teach us how to practice his presence in our lives. “If a church is not clear on their discipleship process, people will move in a multitude of directions. Process is essential.”²¹ However, process is not the same thing as program. Many Christians and churches are driven by a flurry of activity: “The church, as a whole, is doing more and more. And the church, as a whole, is making less and less of a difference.”²² Our process must have a clearly defined end, and the means must be intentional. Rainer and Geiger remind us “You don’t drift into physical

¹⁸ Rainer and Geiger, *Simple Church*, 79.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 242.

²⁰ Stanley, loc. 2085-2090.

²¹ Rainer and Geiger, 242.

²² *Ibid.*, 228.

fitness or spiritual growth. And churches do not drift into spiritual health or effective kingdom advancement. We drift away from those things, not toward them. And drift never corrects itself.”²³

Jeremiah 18 employs a highly visual motif that beautifully demonstrates how God purposefully shapes us into that which ultimately fulfills His purposes:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: “Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.” So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him (Jeremiah 18:1-4).

Discipleship is the means by which Christ’s followers submit to the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying grace. God uses the tools we offer Him to shape us into what seems best to Him: our hurts, hang-ups, mistakes, failures, and even our obedience. As we submit to the Divine Potter, He works all things together for His glory and our good (Romans 8:28). He produces within us the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23-24). Dallas Willard said, “The fruit of the Spirit simply is the inner character of Jesus himself that is brought about in us through the process of Christian spiritual formation. It is the outcome of spiritual formation. It is Christ formed in us.”²⁴

Theologically, we get this; we understand that sanctification is a progressive work. Richard Taylor’s observations are instructive as he commendably differentiates between relative versus real change. “Relative changes in salvation are justification, adoption, and positional sanctification. They are relative in the sense that they are changes of relationship, not (in themselves) subjective changes in the person.”²⁵

²³ Ibid., 242.

²⁴ Willard, loc. 1742-1744.

Initial sanctification and regeneration occur simultaneously when a sinner embraces by faith God's offer of unmerited grace. The very moment faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ is exercised, the sinner is declared a saint; the lost is found and one's citizenship is transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. These changes are positional; they occur in the mind of God. "Positional sanctification is that sanctity which is ours derived from our acceptance by a holy God. This is a combination of holiness that inheres in anything devoted to God, and of holiness because of relation to God."²⁶ This relational/real dichotomy explains theologically why Christians remain spiritually incomplete and immature, initially. However, this theological explanation does not excuse the nearly imperceptible spiritual progress that many veteran followers of Christ exhibit. There is clearly a missing link in our contemporary discipleship process.

Lighting a Candle: Three Key Components to the Implementation Process

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, we will propose a discipleship process grounded on three key components: *Emotional Health*, *Spiritual Habits*, and *Gifts of the Holy Spirit*.

Emotional Health

According to authors Peter Scazzero and Warren Bird, "It is not possible for a Christian to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature."²⁷ This

²⁵ Taylor, *Exploring Christian Holiness*, 139.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Peter Scazzero and Warren Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 52.

statement resonates; it is intuitive, “Truth is recognition.”²⁸ It explains why some people, having been Christians for a very long time, remain spiritual infants failing to successfully reflect the *Imago Dei* or incarnate the *Missio Dei* in their world. David Seamands suggested, “Acceptance of Jesus Christ, as important and eternally valuable as this is, is not a shortcut to emotional health.”²⁹ According to Scazzero and Bird,

To be adopted into God’s family with the new name of ‘Christian’ does not erase the past. God does not give us amnesia or do emergency emotional/spiritual reconstructive surgery. God does forgive the past, but he does not erase it...Discipleship then, must include honest reflection on the positive and negative impact of our family of origin as well as other major influences in our lives. This is hard work. Following Jesus is a process that takes time.³⁰

Redeemed people remain flawed relationally, spiritually, physically, and emotionally. Spirit-filled Christ followers continue to suffer the effects of the fall; our discipleship process ought to take this into consideration. We must help the disciple of Christ in navigating the path toward emotional health. Far too many Kingdom citizens continue to medicate personal pain through addiction: “people use work, TV, drugs, alcohol, shopping or food binges, busyness, sexual escapades, unhealthy relational attachments, even serving others at church incessantly – anything to medicate the pain of life.”³¹ Scazzero and Bird contend that this occurs when we “We slice out the emotional portion of who we are, deeming it suspect, irrelevant, or of secondary importance. Contemporary discipleship models tend to esteem the spiritual over the physical,

²⁸ Sweet and Viola, *Jesus: A Theography*, 274.

²⁹ David A. Seamands, *Healing for Damaged Emotions* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1981), 12-13.

³⁰ Scazzero and Bird, 102-103.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 169.

emotional, social, and intellectual components of who we are.³² However, the reign of God cannot be restricted to the spiritual realm; it is not possible to partially surrender to the Lord. As the old adage goes, *He must be Lord of all or not at all.*

People have a tendency to guard their emotional person with a vengeance; there are few things that grip the human soul with terror more than the prospect of being emotionally exposed. Henry Cloud and John Townsend contend, “We change our behavior when the pain of staying the same becomes greater than the pain of changing.”³³

Dan Allender and Tremper Longman warn,

Ignoring our emotions is turning our back on reality; listening to our emotions ushers us into reality. And reality is where we meet God... Emotions are the language of the soul. They are the cry that gives the heart a voice... However, we often turn a deaf ear— through emotional denial, distortion, or disengagement. We strain out anything disturbing in order to gain tenuous control of our inner world. We are frightened and ashamed of what leads into our consciousness. In neglecting our intense emotions, we are false to ourselves and lose a wonderful opportunity to know God. We forget that change comes through brutal honesty and vulnerability before God.³⁴

Unfortunately, “brutal honesty” and “vulnerability before God” are not knee-jerk reactions amongst the faithful, and too often those hiding behind the guise of religion choose denial over authenticity. “Denial has been defined as a false system of beliefs that are not based on reality and a self-protecting behavior that keeps us from honestly facing the truth.”³⁵ Denial forms an impenetrable barrier to progress. The pathway to healing and wholeness is paved with honesty and authenticity.

³² Ibid., 51.

³³ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries with Kids* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 72.

³⁴ Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman III, *The Cry of the Soul* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 24-25.

³⁵ John Baker and Rick Warren. “Stepping Out of Denial into God's Grace,” Zondervan.com. http://zondervan.com/sites/default/files/cms/carr/celebraterecovery_pgguide.pdf (accessed December 10, 2013).

Often Christians, particularly in conservative circles, refer to discussions of emotional health as “psycho-babble.” Larry Crabb identifies those who insist that all dysfunctional behaviors can be resolved by spiritual means as *Nothing Butterists*: “nothing but grace, nothing but Christ, nothing but faith nothing but the Word.”³⁶

Crabb does not deny the reality or impact of sin. In fact he states “There would be no problems of any sort in all of God’s creation if sin had not worked its corrupting effect.”³⁷ However, sin’s polluting influence has permeated the whole person: body, soul, mind, heart. Consequently, a spiritual formation process that ignores the whole man will prove ineffectual. Nothing Butterists fail to recognize what Henry Cloud and John Townsend differentiate as sin by us, against us, and in the world:

Sin entered the world through Satan, and it manifested itself in four areas: sin by us, sin against us, sin in the world, and Satan’s strategies.³⁸ ...Sin by us: We all have a sinful nature that we inherited from our first parents, the first dysfunctional family. Sin against us: “Not only are we perpetrators of evil, but we are also victims of it. We are sinful, but we are also sinned against.”³⁹ ...Sin in the World: “There are grave problems for which we really can’t point the finger. There is no specific ‘perpetrator.’ It’s simply the fact that we now live in a world that also suffers the effects of the Fall. Bad things happen.⁴⁰ ...Satan has made a profession of trying to have us condemned before God’s throne.⁴¹

The Nothing Butterists insist, “Definite personal sin is immediately responsible for whatever problem a person is experiencing.”⁴² They deny the reality that sin is not

³⁶ Lawrence J. Crabb, *Effective Biblical Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1977), 40.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁸ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Safe People: How to Find Relationships That Are Good for You and Avoid Those That Aren't* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1995), 63.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

only by us, but also against us, and in the world. The enemy's strategic schemes target the whole person with a hellish vengeance, and it is naïve to suppose that anything less than a whole-person response is sufficient.

Cloud and Townsend define emotionally unhealthy people as *unsafe* people who exhibit the following character traits:

They think they have it all together (instead of admitting their weaknesses), religious instead of spiritual, defensive, self-righteous; they avoid problems (rather than dealing with them), demand trust (rather than earning it), they are perfectionistic, blame others (rather than taking responsibility), and they are dishonest.⁴³

It is easy to see how emotional immaturity undermines not only one's own spiritual formation, but can also negatively impact those around us. Emotionally healthy people on the other hand nudge us toward maturity: "Safe people are individuals who draw us closer to being the people God intended us to be. Though not perfect, they are 'good enough' in their own character that the net effect of their presence in our lives is positive. They are accepting, honest, and present, and they help us bear good fruit in our lives."⁴⁴

Cloud and Townsend remind us,

The best example of a safe person is found in Jesus. In him were found the three qualities of a safe person: dwelling, grace, and truth. 'The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth'(John 1:14)... Safe relationships are an aspect of the incarnational qualities of Jesus, for Jesus became present as a man, in the flesh.⁴⁵

⁴² Crabb, 45.

⁴³ Cloud and Townsend, 28-37.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 145.

Emotionally healthy people live in accountable, grace-filled communities: “True safe relationships are ones where we can speak the truth to one another, confronting each other as needed. Grace and the absence of condemnation allow us to do this with less fear than would occur in a condemning relationship.”⁴⁶ Spiritual formation flourishes in safe and authentic communities where one is free to step out of denial and into the healing rays of God’s grace. This can only occur in an environment where safe people mutually submit to one another in love. Larry Crabb reminds us that this necessity for connection is inextricably embedded in our DNA:

We have all been created by an Eternal Community of three fully connected persons. When we’re told that we bear God’s image, we immediately know two things... We were designed to connect with others: Connecting is life... Connecting with others depends on using our capacity to relate for the enjoyment and enhancement of someone other than ourselves.⁴⁷

Crabb envisions such a community of people connecting and “releasing the energy of Christ.” He says, “Connecting begins when we enter the battle for someone’s soul. It continues as we prayerfully envision what Christ would look like in that person’s life. It climaxes when the life of Christ within us is released, when something wonderful and alive and good pours out of us to touch the heart of another.”⁴⁸

Admittedly, not every church is a safe place, and not all people who call themselves Christians are emotionally healthy people. “God allows unsafe people to be in the church. They are wolves in sheep’s clothing, and they are dangerous. While they may seem religious, they may not even be true believers. While they do many things in his

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Lawrence J. Crabb, *Connecting* (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997), 53.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 170.

name, they are not his sheep” (Matthew 13:24-30; Matthew 7:22-23).⁴⁹ We will never completely escape the influence of the counter-kingdom during the inaugurated reign of God. Therefore, we must proactively develop a process that integrates the promotion of emotional health and discipleship. Peter Scazzero has implemented such an initiative:

Our church does not simply offer small groups and seminars/workshops around Scripture, but also around emotionally healthy skills and relationships. We focus on topics such as speaking and listening, handling anger constructively, fighting fairly (conflict resolution), faulty thinking, expectations and breaking the power of the past. We recognize that both spiritual practices (prayer, Bible study, giving, fellowship) and emotionally healthy practices (listening, speaking, fighting fairly) are essential if we are to mature in Christ.⁵⁰

Scazzero acknowledges, “The link between emotional health and spiritual maturity is a large, unexplored area of discipleship.”⁵¹ How unfortunate! The community of faith is the ideal place for emotional healing to occur. Christian psychologist Larry Crabb conceded, “For most of the twentieth century, we have wrongly defined soul wounds as psychological disorder and delegated their treatment to trained specialists.”⁵² Consequently, the church has either succumbed to, or has been robbed of, a vital role in the healing of personal wounds. Crabb suggests,

The work of discipling has been wrongly defined as less than and different from psychotherapy and counseling. Maybe it isn't. Maybe discipleship, defined properly as caring for the soul, is the reality, and psychotherapy is the imitation. Perhaps husbands and wives should be discipling each other; perhaps parents should be discipling their children, and friends should be discipling their friends. Maybe they can, and maybe discipling (or shepherding) was designed to do what we think only therapists should tackle.⁵³

⁴⁹ Cloud and Townsend, 162-163.

⁵⁰ Scazzero and Bird, 104.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵² Crabb, *Connecting*, 200.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 201.

Spiritual Habits (Personal)

For centuries, Christians recognized the importance of developing both personal and corporate spiritual habits. The notion that discipleship can be attained apart from discipline is a modern phenomenon. Only recently have Christ followers come to believe that the impartation of correct information will result in transformation. Historically, the practice and application of spiritual disciplines has been an essential part of discipleship. The following is a partial list of common spiritual disciplines: *Fasting, Silence, Solitude, Simplicity, Rest, Secrecy, Journaling, Confession, Scripture, Prayer, Penance, Restitution, and Forgiveness.*

We generally pair the word “habit” with the word “bad”; consequently, *habit* has gotten a bad rap. We have seemingly forgotten that the development of good habits is just as important as the cessation of bad ones. Fundamentally, a habit is a behavior that we repeat routinely and involuntarily. “One paper published by a Duke University researcher in 2006 found that more than 40 percent of the actions people performed each day weren’t actual decisions, but habits.”⁵⁴

Some moderns are deceptively of the opinion that practicing spiritual disciplines habitually is unspiritual. It feels forced and unnatural, like going through the motions, which is something we have been instructed to avoid in our spiritual lives. We assume that if spiritual disciplines are practiced organically then they will just develop naturally; the problem is that discipline does not come naturally. Truthfully, doing what comes naturally is not a sign of spiritual maturity; it is actually a sign of spiritual laziness.

⁵⁴ Bas Verplanken and Wendy Wood, “Interventions to Break and Create Consumer Habits,” *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 25, no. 1 (2006): 90-103. doi:10.1509/jppm.25.1.90.

Habits are established as we consistently exercise will power, and developing will power is much like muscle building; regular training will produce more of it. According to Charles Duhigg, “As people strengthened their willpower muscles in one part of their lives—in the gym, or a money management program—that strength spilled over into what they ate or how hard they worked. Once willpower became stronger, it touched everything.”⁵⁵

Discipline overflows into all areas of our lives, which explains why spiritual maturity and emotional maturity are inseparable. Conversely, a Christ follower who is undisciplined emotionally, relationally, and physically is unlikely to demonstrate a deep level of spiritual maturity. Robert Mulholland reminds us,

Spiritual growth is, in large measure, patterned on the nature of physical growth. We do not expect to put an infant into its crib at night and in the morning find a child, an adolescent or yet an adult. We expect that infant to grow into maturity according to the processes that God has ordained for physical growth to wholeness. The same thing is true of our spiritual life.⁵⁶

A discipleship process, which will produce effective Kingdom witnesses, must necessarily incorporate the deliberate practice and development of spiritual habits. When these spiritual exercises are repeated consistently (not haphazardly as is the custom of many), they facilitate conformity to the image of Christ. The practice of spiritual disciplines is a vital component in spiritual formation.

The progressive nature of our spiritual pilgrimage is an especially challenging proposition in our fast-food culture. The American church prefers methods that function

⁵⁵ Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (Random House, Inc. Kindle Edition., 2012), locs. 2340-2342.

⁵⁶ Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, 21.

more like microwaves than crockpots. However, there really is no shortcut to spiritual maturity. Mulholland said,

It is not surprising that we, as members of an instant-gratification culture, tend to become impatient with any process of development that requires of us more than a limited involvement of our time and energies. If we do not receive the desired results almost instantly, we become impatient and frustrated.⁵⁷

And Richard Foster issued the following solemn reminder: “The apostolic band did not leap from ground zero to the dizzy heights of Spirit-rulership in a single bound. Neither will we. For the most part they moved into that realm one step at a time, sometimes moving forward a bit, sometimes withdrawing.”⁵⁸

Reaction to the cult of humanism is perhaps another reason why Christians sometimes oppose the idea of spiritual discipline. In our overzealousness, we have divorced faith from works to the extent that we have developed a “works phobia.” Arnold Heini justifiably warned “we want to make it quite clear that we cannot free and purify our own heart by exerting our own will.”⁵⁹ Richard Foster expounds on this conviction:

Inner righteousness is a gift from God to be graciously received. The needed change within us is God’s work, not ours. The demand is for an inside job, and only God can work from the inside. We cannot attain or earn this righteousness of the kingdom of God; it is a grace that is given.⁶⁰

However, Foster goes on to assert, “God has given us the disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving his grace. The disciplines allow us to place ourselves before God so that he can transform us.”⁶¹ Grace and discipline are not mutually

⁵⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁸ Foster, 179.

⁵⁹ Arnold Heini, *Freedom from Sinful Thoughts: Christ Alone Breaks the Curse* (Rifton, NY: Plough Publishing House, 1973), 94.

⁶⁰ Foster, 6.

exclusive. Through the development and practice of spiritual habits, we cooperate with the Holy Spirit. As we surrender to his influence in our lives he removes obstacles and barriers that impede intimacy with him, preparing us for growth in grace.

Stephen Macchia admonishes, “The healthy church provides training, and resources for members of all ages to develop their daily spiritual disciplines.”⁶² This can be achieved in small group environments and through life-on-life relationships.

Mentoring may be the most effective, though admittedly not the most efficient, method of making disciples. Macchia contends,

We desperately need to reclaim the priority of mentoring, also known as discipleship of spiritual direction, in the church today. Regardless of the term you choose, there is a crying need for men and women of God to ‘take on’ a younger believer, investing time and wisdom into the lives of those who are growing in their faith.⁶³

Spiritual Habits (Corporate)

Corporate spiritual disciplines are equally and perhaps even more important than private disciplines. Keith Drury reminds us, “The Scriptures repeatedly affirm that Christ died for all. He gave his life as a ransom for many. God is always working with a people, not just persons.”⁶⁴

One of the most valuable consequences of one’s faithful observance of private disciplines is how it prepares us and benefits others when we gather for corporate worship, “All this will heighten your expectancy in public worship because the gathered

⁶¹ Ibid., 7.

⁶² Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Church: 10 Characteristics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 59.

⁶³ Ibid., 73.

⁶⁴ Drury, *There Is No I in Church*, 15.

experience of worship just becomes a continuation and an intensification of what you have been trying to do all week long.”⁶⁵ Mulholland states,

Our spiritual formation comes within a corporate and social context. Our growth toward wholeness in Christ is for the sake of others within the body of Christ, that we might nurture one another into the wholeness of Christ. Our growth toward wholeness is also for the sake of others beyond the body of Christ, that the redeeming, healing, transforming love of God may be made known in a broken and hurting world.⁶⁶

Drury recognizes the following examples of corporate spiritual disciplines:

Fellowship, Corporate Prayer, Scripture Reading, Testimony, The Lord’s Supper, and Baptism. He argues that through the shared practice of these corporate spiritual habits God seeks to sanctify for himself a *people*:

This is an alien idea in our modern, privatized world because we tend to see the church as a filling station, a place we visit as customers to get a boost for doing the things we do individually all week. We are dead wrong in this. Two thousand years of church history and orthodox theology contradict us on that point. Christianity is not about me; it is about us. Being a Christian means being a part of the people of God. Yes, God wants to change you personally, but more so, He wants to change the people of God.⁶⁷

This systematic, habitual practice of the presence of God is a missing link in many contemporary discipleship programs. If we hope to empower citizens of Christ’s Kingdom to effectually become ambassadors and with-nesses in this age, we must redeem historic personal and corporate spiritual disciplines as a vital means of grace and as instruments of transformation. Richard Foster declared,

Superficiality is the curse of our age. The doctrine of instant satisfaction is a primary spiritual problem. The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people. The classical disciplines of the spiritual life call us to move beyond surface living into the depths. They

⁶⁵ Foster, 171.

⁶⁶ Mulholland, 141.

⁶⁷ Drury, 23.

invite us to explore the inner caverns of the spiritual realm. They urge us to be the answer to a hollow world.⁶⁸

Gifts of the Holy Spirit

This is the third and final component of our discipleship proposal. Jesus said, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). The Lord’s discipleship model included serving others immediately and concurrently with the call to discipleship. Our contemporary programs fail to sufficiently empower disciples to make disciples soon enough. There is an indefinite period of nurturing that often fails to adequately prepare Christians to reproduce. After attending classes and participating in programs for years, religious people often feel they are not qualified to make disciples.

Spiritual gifts are given so that Christ’s ambassadors might effectively demonstrate God’s reign in the world. They are the means by which Kingdom witnesses are endowed and deployed to carry out the *Missio Dei* in the present age. Through the exercise of spiritual gifts, Disciples of Christ glorify God, edify the church, and incarnate the gospel of the Kingdom to the world. Tony Campolo asserted,

As the Holy Spirit gives direction to our individual lives, He simultaneously integrates us into God’s grand mission to establish His Kingdom in this world. The Holy Spirit is a revolutionary force in society. It is the Holy Spirit working in us that turns us into persons who are set to work rescuing God’s lost creation from its messed-up and polluted condition.⁶⁹

However, before we attempt to demonstrate how Spiritual gifts uniquely qualify believers to accomplish God’s mission, it is important to note that the three components

⁶⁸ Foster, 1.

⁶⁹ Anthony Campolo, *How to Be Pentecostal Without Speaking in Tongues* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991), 69.

in our discipleship proposal are successive. Emotional health must be cultivated prior to any serious attempt at discerning spiritual gifting. Peter Wagner argued, “The ability to discover spiritual gifts, in my understanding, is a function of emotional maturity.

Emotionally mature people are ready to know their gifts, but emotional maturity comes at different ages for different people.”⁷⁰ In many cases, emotional maturity concerns matters unrelated to age. The present emotional health crisis in the church may explain why so few Christ followers are able to recognize and identify their spiritual gift or gift mix. Because discipleship processes often fail to address emotional health and spiritual habits, it is no wonder the gifts of the Holy Spirit are either underdeveloped or ignored altogether. However, as Bruce Bugbee solemnly reminds us, “Doing gift-based ministry is not optional. It is biblical. It is God’s operating system for his church.”⁷¹ In the same vein, Wagner contends that spiritual gifts are God’s means of governing his church as opposed to the prevailing systems devised by men:

Instead of a dictatorship or a democracy, God has chosen to make the Body of Christ an organism, Jesus being the head and each member functioning with one or more spiritual fits. Understanding spiritual gifts, then, is the foundational key to understanding the organization of the church.⁷²

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit must necessarily be taught and sought. Stanley Horton argues that the Apostle Paul affirmed this in 1 Corinthians 12:31 when he said “Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.”

This command implies that they should strive for whatever gifts are most needed or would be most edifying at the time. It also indicates that we do not receive the

⁷⁰ C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1994), 224.

⁷¹ Bruce Bugbee and Don Cousins, *Network Participants Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 2005), 16.

⁷² Wagner, 30.

gifts of the Spirit automatically, just because we have been baptized in the Spirit. We must be open to the Spirit and respond to Him with active, obedient faith, for He will not force His gifts on us.⁷³

For centuries, the church denied the gifts of the Holy Spirit as well as the doctrine of the priesthood of believers. It morphed into a clergy-led institution, depriving members of the body from functioning according to God's design. It is commonly believed that the Protestant Reformation changed all of that, but Peter Wagner reminds us,

Martin Luther permanently changed Christendom when he rediscovered the priesthood of all believers. Still, Lutheranism retained much of the clericalism of the Roman Catholic Church. One wonders why it took more than 400 years for the churches born of the Reformation to rediscover the biblical teaching of the ministry of all believers.⁷⁴

It is through the exercise of spiritual gifts that the ambassadors of the reign of God are equipped as Kingdom witnesses in the world. Therefore, it is imperative that our discipleship model intentionally incorporates a process for gift discernment and deployment.

Wagner suggested, "Ignorance of Spiritual Gifts may be a chief cause of retarded church growth today. It also may be at the root of much of the discouragement, insecurity, frustration and guilt that plagues many Christians and curtails their total effectiveness for God,"⁷⁵ and Bugbee said, "Healthy churches are functioning on the basis of gift-based ministry teams. They have systems in place for personal discovery and ministry connection."⁷⁶

⁷³ Walvoord, Dieter, Hoekema, Horton, and McQuilkin, *Five Views on Sanctification*, 132.

⁷⁴ Wagner, 20.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁶ Bugbee and Cousins, 15.

Conceiving of a church functioning apart from spiritual gifts is unimaginable today, and yet, it was not until the twentieth century that the exercise of gifts of the Holy Spirit was broadly reintroduced. Pentecostal historian William Kay demonstrates how the return of spiritual gifts has revolutionized the church (speaking specifically to the Pentecostal tradition):

The Holy Spirit democratized Pentecostalism by distributing spiritual gifts widely so that, if there was a secret to Pentecostal growth, it lay with this capacity of Pentecostal churches to energize every member. In a sacramental or liturgical church, the professional clergy read the services and lead the prayers while the congregation is restricted to prayer book responses or other minor contributions. In the Pentecostal congregation, every Spirit-filled member might have vital light to shed on what should be done next because every member is in some sense a minister.⁷⁷

Discipleship as a process is the means by which we cooperate with the Holy Spirit as he equips us for ministry. Our methodologies in and of themselves cannot produce disciples; they are merely the human component of a spiritual process. As we develop and foster emotional health, we are restored within and with others. Through the practice of spiritual habits, we are restored to intimacy with God. And through the exercise of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to selflessly serve with Kingdom power and provision.

Conclusion

Throughout this project I have endeavored to articulate the following terms in an effort to redeem and revive the biblical Kingdom of God metaphor for the twenty-first-century Church:

⁷⁷ William K. Kay, *Pentecostalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Kindle Edition, 2011), locs. 1329-1335.

Kingdom of God: (Basileia Tou Θεου) God's sovereign/universal reign, rule and authority.

Church, properly so called: (Ecclesia) – the people of God, called out, set apart, and sent forth as Kingdom with-nesses, living in submission to the reign of God.

Sanctification: (ἀγιασμός) – The work of the Holy Spirit, conforming Kingdom citizens to the image of Christ. According to Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology, a thing or person is sanctified when “set apart for the purpose intended by its designer.”⁷⁸

Finally, we recommended an aggressive discipleship proposal designed to facilitate radical spiritual transformation. There is an urgent need for an invasion of Kingdom with-nesses, an uprising of those who have been redeemed, restored, and released in the world to reflect the character and priorities of Christ. We can no longer settle for a religious program geared toward consumers passively waiting for Heaven. The world that Christ came to save is in desperate need of a missional movement; a company of Kingdom with-nesses called and equipped to compellingly incarnate the reign of God: revealing the Image of God (*Imago Dei*), carrying out the Mission of God (*Missio Dei*), and being witnesses of and for the Kingdom of God (*Basileia Tou Θεου*).

⁷⁸ Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996).

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