

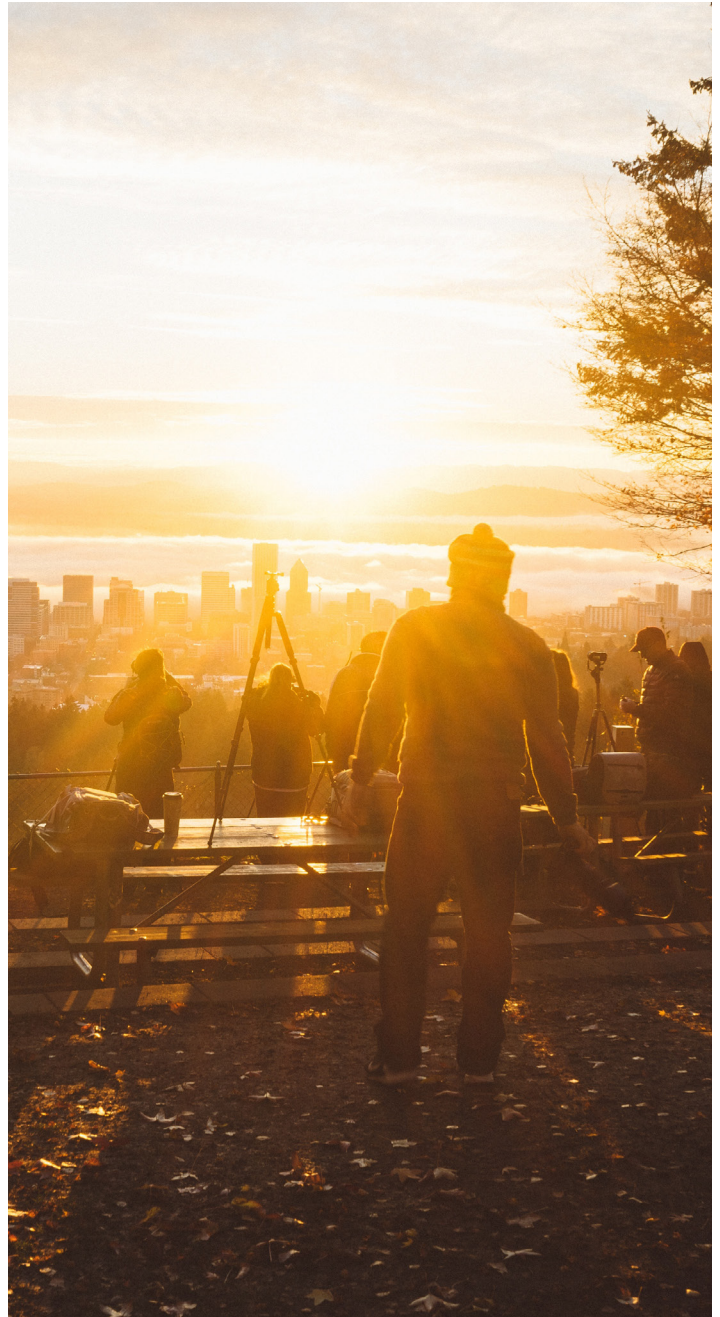
THE VISION OF THE CHURCH

There is a steady increase in the number of Christians leaving the church - and they are leaving for very good reasons. "A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost their faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith."¹

While we are watching this exodus, there are many more who are still involved with their churches, but are frustrated and contemplating leaving. The trouble is, Christians cannot have Jesus without the Church. One theologian warns us: "Don't bash the bride no matter how ugly she looks to you. If you start attacking the bride, sooner or later you're going to have to take on the Groom, and I don't think you want this."²

Augustine of Hippo, who is one of the most influential theologians of church history, once said: "the church may be a whore but she is still my mother."³ This growing discontent with the state of the church requires us to reevaluate, and the best way to do this is to gain an understanding of what God intended her to be.

Since the term "church" is only mentioned twice in all of the gospels (Matthew 16:18; 18:17), we first need to understand the message that Jesus lived and proclaimed before we can answer the question, "What is the church?"



THE MESSAGE OF JESUS

“It has been said that every great leader or teacher has one core message that permeates everything they do and say; one central vision that can be summed up in a sentence; one key note that provides the framework and unifies every other statement they make and action they take. It was true for Karl Marx, for Gandhi, for Martin Luther King Jr., for Freud. And it’s equally true for Jesus.”⁴

The reason Jesus came into this world was not primarily to save people from their sins, show the world the love of God, or reconcile us with God and each other. These are all good and needed messages, but they are not the one core message that holds it all together. These messages, and his many others, form the central vision and the reason why Jesus came into the world: to establish the kingdom of God. The evangelist Luke, tells us that Jesus was sent for the purpose of preaching the kingdom of God in many cities. “But He said to them, ‘I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose’”(Luke 4:43).

Jesus, however, does not stop there. He then instructs his disciples to proclaim the same message: “And He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:2).

Luke then makes it clear that even after Jesus was resurrected from the dead, the message of the kingdom was his main concern. “To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:4).

After Jesus’ time on earth, Luke explicitly points out that the evangelist Philip (Acts 8:12) and the apostle Paul (Acts 28:30-31) preached the good news of the kingdom of God.

Even though every theologian would agree that the kingdom of God is at the center of Jesus’ message, the evangelical church has lost the message of Jesus over the last 50-100 years. When asked at the Lausanne Conference of World Evangelization in 1974, “How much have you heard here about the Kingdom of God?” Green’s answer was, “Not much. It is not our language. But it was Jesus’ prime concern.”⁵

Wagner, one of the best known leaders in the so called “church growth” movement, adds: “I cannot help wondering out loud why I haven’t heard more about [the kingdom of God] in the thirty years I have been a Christian. I certainly read about it enough in the Bible... But I honestly cannot remember any pastor whose ministry I have been under actually preaching a sermon on the Kingdom of God. As I rummage through my own sermon barrel, I now realize that I myself have never preached a sermon on it. Where has the Kingdom been?”⁶

We must rediscover the kingdom of God and understand it as God intended. If church leaders form an inaccurate view of God’s kingdom, they develop a distorted view of almost everything else concerning Christianity.

EXPLAINING THE KINGDOM

Kingdom language does not mean much to people in the Western world anymore. They live in democracy, not a kingdom, and it is a challenge to understand what a kingdom looks like. A kingdom can be understood as the sphere of influence where your desires can become reality. To put it in other terms, it is the range of your effective will.⁷ If the kingdom is one's sphere of influence, the kingdom of God is the realm where what God desires actually happens - where His perfect will takes place and He is in control.

“The kingdom, the in-breaking shalom of God, is available now to everyone through me.”⁸ Here, Chalke defines the Shalom of God, which appears over two hundred and fifty times in the Hebrew Scriptures, as “a kaleidoscopic vision of what life is like when lived in line with God’s agenda. It incorporates contentment, health, justice, liberation, fulfillment, freedom and hope...Shalom is about comprehensive well-being and flourishing at every level of life—socially, economically, spiritually and politically.”⁹

The kingdom of God is the “perfect world” where things are the way God wants them to be, and Jews of the first century were waiting and anticipating that God’s kingdom would come one day.¹⁰ The revolutionary statement that Jesus made, however was that the kingdom of God will not only come one day at the end of times, but is already here at hand, it is starting in and through his person (Luke 17:21).

The kingdom of God is not just something in the future; it is God’s shalom breaking into our midst, into our lives, into our mess and chaos.¹¹ God starts to heal, to set free, to forgive, and to put back together what is broken in our world. The kingdom of God is “the living, breathing presence and purpose and reign of God on our planet.”¹²

Wakabayashi explains the kingdom of God like this: “God’s reign descends in and through Jesus and is applied in a world that is not yet fully under his authority. Sicknesses are healed, demons are banished, sins are forgiven and people are assured of God’s love for the poor. Wherever God’s kingdom comes, his kingship is applied and the evil of darkness is banished.”¹³

HEAVEN ON EARTH

Perhaps the best way to explain the kingdom of God in very simple terms is through the Lord's Prayer. Jesus teaches his disciples in Matthew 6 to pray, and in this prayer, he makes a statement that summarizes the kingdom of God in a powerful way. In Matthew 6:10, Jesus instructs his disciples to pray: "Your kingdom come, your will be done 'on earth as it is in heaven.'"

The word "will" is the Greek word "Thelma" which can also be translated as wish, desire, passion, or dream. The Lord's Prayer tells us that God has a passion, God has a dream, God has a desire. God's dream is that whatever happens in heaven is also happening here on earth. Jesus summarizes the kingdom of God in the Lord's Prayer as God's dream of heaven on earth.

New Testament Scholar N.T. Wright states the following concerning the Jewish expectation of the kingdom in the first century: "They were not thinking about how to secure themselves a place in heaven after they died. The phrase "kingdom of heaven," which we find frequently in Matthew's Gospel where the others have "kingdom of God," does not refer to a place, called "heaven, where God's people will go after death. It refers to the rule of heaven, that is, of God, being brought to bear in the present world. Thy kingdom come, said Jesus, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven. Jesus' contemporaries knew that the creator God intended to bring justice and peace to his world here and now." ¹⁴

Jesus proclaimed that God wants to transform all aspects of society into the kind of world that God had in mind when he created us. God's dream is not for everyone to go to heaven, but for heaven to break into this world and transform our world into the place it ought to be. "A little faith will take you to heaven, but I pray for the kind of faith that will bring heaven to earth!" When we pray "Thy kingdom come," we pray for the kingdom to "take over at all points in the personal, social, and political order where it is now excluded: "On earth as it is in heaven." With this prayer we are invoking it, as in faith we are acting it, into the real world of our daily existence." ¹⁵

DOING OUR PART

The church was intended to be a place that fostered the in-breaking of heaven to earth. God's desire for the church was that we would participate in the transformation of every aspect of our communities. The growing frustration with the church is often vocalized as an inability to engage in God's intention for His people because their church has lost sight of what Jesus called us to do. The vision for the church at Church in Action is to align ourselves as closely as possible to Jesus, his methods, his mindset, and his passion so that we can participate in bringing heaven into our world and our daily existence.



ENDNOTES

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- 10 Wright N.T. (2008). For a deeper understanding of the first century Jews/Christians background read Surprised by hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church. New York, NY: Harper One.
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- 14 Wright N.T. (2001). The Challenge of Jesus. Downers Grove: Ill. InterVarsity Press, 2001. p.36-37.
- 15 Willard D. (1997). The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our hidden life in God. San Francisco: HarperCollins. p. 26.