

Rethinking the Kingdom of God

By Bob Heppe

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The church of Jesus Christ has one dominant task: the expansion of the kingdom of God through the proclamation of a holistic word and deed gospel. In other words, the fulfilling of the Great Commission, understood as the proclamation and demonstration of the Gospel of the kingdom, is the priority – *the primary task* – of the church. This is not to dismiss worship or fellowship, or edification. Worship is the ultimate goal of the church. Fellowship and edification are essential elements of the church. They are vital aspects of the church as redeemed people of God. But these aspects of the life of the church should be wrapped around the grand cause of recapturing this fallen world for the glory of the king. Indeed, these aspects of the church often receive meaning and vitality from the care of the missionary mandate of the church.

The world needs a gospel – a gospel about a compassionate Savior, a compelling cause (righteousness, justice, liberty, and reconciliation), a consuming passion, and a counter-culture (kingdom) community. Christ's love, expressed through his substitutionary atonement and providential care of our lives, speaks to our guilty consciences and sets us free to enjoy God, accept ourselves and others, and serve the Lord with robust freedom. Our churches must constantly point people to our compassionate Savior. His love for us and His compassion for the world are the engine that drives our consuming passion for His compelling cause (II Cor. 5:12-21). However, the gospel of the Western world has largely proclaimed a limited Savior, neither compassionate nor compelling. At worst, Christians are being fed a gospel of legalistic moralism, leading to guilt and powerlessness. At best, where grace is being taught, often the

emphasis and interest is on Jesus who answers merely to sinful self-interest: "How can I find peace with myself?" Grace becomes self-centered and Jesus becomes merely a "Jesus-for-me Jesus", a Divine therapists who has little more in mind than aiding my pursuit of self-realization. The non-Christian goal of self-fulfillment/self-realization is baptized and transformed into the Christian pursuit of sanctification.

We have lost sight of and we have failed to preach, teach, and live the gospel of the Kingdom. The theme of the Kingdom of God, which was central to Jesus' teaching, is a necessary corrective to the self-centered manipulation of the gospel in our times. In the Gospels, the good news is that **THE MESSIAH HAS ARRIVED, THE KINGDOM IS HERE**. "Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of God, and saying 'The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'" (Mark 1:14, 15). Jesus describes His Kingdom as coming with tremendous force (Mat 11:12). In fact, the actual word used is *violence*. In the person of Jesus, God's saving rule (=the Kingdom) has invaded the world, driving back the powers of darkness. The result is that those who are in bondage to the guilt and power of sin receive forgiveness and deliverance, are collected into the family of God, and constituted as His new people.

The Gospel of the Kingdom, which Christ preached and demonstrated, is much broader than our petty concerns for personal survival, fulfillment, security, significance, or even sanctification. It does not present us with a meek and mild Jesus who would not dare disturb or disrupt our pursuit of comfort and security, but One come to set the world on fire! It presents a plunderer who demands that His followers join the battle to loot the vanquished enemy. Either gather with Him or we will be scattered a part from Him (Mat 12:30). Paradoxically, a "Jesus-for-me-Jesus" turns out not to be able to deliver security, significance, and self-fulfillment for which the world longs (and for which

Jesus is pressed into service). We hear men and women inside and outside the church crying about being lonely, unhappy, unfulfilled, anxious, identity stricken, and soon. What's the problem? They haven't met the *real* Jesus.

The real Jesus calls them to set their sights much higher: to become so enthralled with Him and His Kingdom purposes that all else loses its appeal, even those intense personal needs. Again, yet another Kingdom paradox is that we become captivated by Christ's compelling vision of a world brought under His saving rule (again, the Kingdom of God), our interests in security, status, finding ourselves, etc. – these needs quietly disappear, and one finds in their place contentment, satisfaction, and wholeness. That is “the expulsive power of a new affection”. He who loses his life... finds it.

American Christians have not been presented with a Jesus who has a compelling purpose: they have been given at worst a condemning God, or at best a “Jesus-for-me-Jesus” who has little more in mind than helping them in the pursuit of success, self-realization, or at best, man-centered satisfaction. That Jesus in the end leaves them unfulfilled and disappointed. He is not big enough to truly satisfy. Even overcoming the mountain of problems, sins and hang-ups that you may have is not a cause worth dying for. We need the real Jesus who came with a sword, with fire in His eyes and belly, who hates the sin and misery that is in the world. He is in the process of binding and plundering the evil one (Matt 12:22) and has called His people to throw themselves into His Kingdom purposes.

We need to be captured by that compelling purpose. Christ's grand cause must become for us a consuming passion, such as was seen in such men as the Apostle Paul, John Wesley, and George Whitfield. The Church has been emasculated by moderation. We have lost sight of the overthrow of the powers of darkness and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Instead, we have settled into a comfortable peacetime mentality, quietly conforming to the American Dream.

Jesus describes the consuming passion in the gospel of Matthew, “The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field; which a man found and hid; and from joy over it goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again the Kingdom of

heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matt 13:44-46). We tend to miss the point of such sayings of Jesus and ask, “Do I have to sell all, give up everything?” But that's not the point at all. The point is the supreme *worth* of salvation and the calling of God. Anyone who responds with the above question misses the point. Did the pearl fanatic feel that he had a difficult choice? Not at all, because he had a consuming passion. God's people need a consuming passion, and Jesus' purposes are the only ones worth being passionate about.

Finally, people of the ilk of these treasure hunters and pearl freaks are not going to make it alone. They need a community of like-minded pearl freaks, a counter-cultural community which will model and provide a real alternative to the priorities and values imposed upon us by the world. We need a church that sustains zeal and provides comfort, support, security, and direction. In a sentence, we need a counter-cultural community that is characterized by radical love.

I want to plant churches that emphasis Christ's compassion and compelling purpose, and where the community of God's people is striving to encourage and sustain in one another a consuming passion for the Kingdom of God. In short, I don't want to plant chaplaincies to the rat race – whether American Britain, or Indian. Rather, I want to plant churches which will hold high the banner of Christ's grand redemptive purposes, and which will enable people to place everything – money, comfort, ambition, reputation, earthly security, family, homes, even our very lives – unqualifiedly at Christ's disposal.

To do that we must begin with a team that is on board; we ourselves must have a consuming passion for the Kingdom. We must not merely be willing, but actually taking up the cross, denying self, and losing ourselves “for my sake and the gospel's” (Mark 8:34, 35). Then we must instill Christ's grand vision for the world in our converts, *from the very moment of their conversion*. Jesus doesn't save us and make s Christians; He saves us and makes us missionaries!

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