

# **THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM**

**DR. DRU DODSON**

**JUNE 9, 2018**

**LAVAL UNIVERSITY**

**QUEBEC CITY, QUEBEC, CANADA**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Good morning ladies and gentlemen! Thank you for joining us today for this conversation on a foundational topic - the Gospel. I'd like to thank my friends Gilles Marcouiller, Paul Harris, and the whole Christian Community of the Two Shores, who are sponsoring this seminar today. I'd also like to say thank you to Dr. Gilles Marcouiller, holder of the Chair of Protestant Evangelical Missiology here at Laval University, and to his department for co-hosting us today. My wife Jo Helen, who is with me, and I thank you for the hospitality and this opportunity to not only present, but to also learn from you as we have a dialogue today. I also bring you greetings from my Christian community, Lake Valley

Community Church of Hot Springs, Arkansas. I believe theological reflection is done best by practitioners, and Lake Valley is a church I helped plant 25 years ago and continue to pastor today.

## SLIDE 1

I died six times, once.

Nearly nine years ago, while on my front porch with three of my grandchildren, I suffered a cardiac arrest. Emergency technicians were there within minutes, a minor miracle itself, and had to repeatedly shock me with the defibrillation paddles, both in my front yard, and again in the ambulance. In medical terms, I “coded” six times. It’s a dramatic story of how I survived, and I won’t go into all the details today. A cardiac arrest like I had has a 94% mortality rate. Of the 6% who do survive, 5 out of those 6 have severe brain damage from lack of oxygen. I was told several months later that I am a 1% survivor . . . Though there has been some debate by friends and family about brain damage!

As you can imagine, this was a life-changing event. Relationships became dearer, a sense of my calling became clearer, and I’m happy to say that most of the time I now live with a great sense of gratitude and

grace. As my wife can tell you, I do occasionally forget, but overall she says I came back “sweeter”, and I hope she’s right. My teaching and preaching of the Bible became more urgent and intense, at least that’s what my congregation tells me. There’s much more I could say about blessing and opportunity I’ve experienced since that day, but for our purposes here today, I tell you this little personal story in order to give you the context for my theological journey toward understanding The Gospel of the Kingdom.

Shortly after my cardiac arrest - and here my memory does fail me on the exact timing - I was reading the Gospel of Luke. I’m sure I was preparing for a teaching or a sermon, and in the course of my study I came to the end of Luke chapter 4:

And the people sought [Jesus] and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them, but he said to them, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.”

“For I was sent for this purpose!” Many familiar things in my life had more beauty, or color, or clarity after surviving the heart attack. And this familiar passage suddenly leapt off the page. What a statement by our Master! If you had asked me at the time, “why was Jesus the Son sent by

the Father?" I would have answered with something like, "to live a sinless, obedient life and willingly die as the atonement for our sins." Or perhaps my answer would have been less formal, "to die for our sins so we might be saved." And both of those statements are true and I affirm them here today.

However, that wasn't Jesus' answer. His statement of purpose was not at all what I would have expected. He said his purpose in being sent by the Father was to "preach to good news of the Kingdom of God."

This brought me to a full stop in my study. While I don't remember the exact date, I remember clearly my Bible on my desk, and leaning back in my chair, and thinking to myself "I don't know what He's talking about." I was stunned. By that time I had completed a Master of Divinity degree, also a Master of Art degree in Christian Thought, and was halfway through a Doctor of Ministry degree in church-based theological education. I had taken courses in Christology, Soteriology, Pneumatology, and Harmartiology. I understood the several theories of the atonement, and the Biblical teaching of propitiation in both Testaments. I had been teaching the Bible informally since my college days, had been a missionary in the Middle East, and had been a pastor to a growing congregation for over fifteen years.

And yet I didn't understand what Jesus was saying. What is "the gospel of the kingdom?" I understood the gospel as summarized by us evangelicals with John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

I had grown up hearing salvation sermons two and three times each week, with a message summarized by something like, "you're separated from God by your sins and are going to hell. Repent and accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and you will be saved and will be with him in heaven for eternity." I understood and believed that gospel, and still do today. I had been taught about false "social gospels" and "prosperity gospels" and could recognize them and their falsehoods.

But what was this "gospel of the kingdom?"

That day in my study, I embarked on a quest to understand the message - the gospel - that Jesus preached. A quest with the intensity, urgency and focus of purpose that I gained after the heart attack,. It's now been eight years, and as I've learned I've taught what I'm seeing to my students in our church-based theological training. I've taught it from our

pulpit, and for the last three years I've shaped our entire pulpit ministry at Lake Valley around teaching the gospel of the kingdom. This quest has borne much fruit in my personal walk with Christ. My students have benefitted from it. And our church has seen significant spiritual growth in maturity and in mission as we've taught it. I'd like to share the fruits of this journey with you today for your consideration.

More than that, I'd like to recommend that you embark on your own journey in understanding this message. I know that many of us teach the Bible regularly. Understanding the gospel of the kingdom will take you deeper into the Scriptures. We would love to see our churches become more mission minded. This message accomplishes just that. Many evangelicals are alarmed by our marginalization in a secular society. The message of Jesus, the gospel of the kingdom, prepares us to live, think and work in just such a context.

Here's my proposition for the day, and an outline of how we'll proceed:

Every pastor and Christian leader who wants a stronger, healthier and more missional church should learn and teach Jesus' gospel of the kingdom, for the following three reasons:

First, our churches are weak and socially ineffective because of our reduced modern evangelical gospels. This is the case I will make in the remainder of this first talk. We've mistaken a Biblical summary for the rich Biblical whole, and have settled for missions committees instead of the whole church pursuing the *Missio Dei*, the mission of God.

Second, our churches will become strong through the gospel of the kingdom because it is large enough for all of life, it is missional in its DNA, and it is the inspired message that the Spirit uses to build the church. As Paul said in Romans 1, it is the power of God unto salvation. It is the whole message that Jesus and His apostles preached. It is not liberal or progressive, it is actually MORE Biblical than our modern reduced evangelical gospels. Laying out the outline of this gospel of the kingdom is the topic of my second talk today.

And third, through this gospel of the kingdom our churches can make Jesus and his message beautiful and believable once again. Our churches can be kingdom outposts marked by kingdom leadership, a beautiful kingdom life together, and kingdom expansion through good works. This will be our third and final presentation today.

In brief, after saving my life, the Lord was saying to me eight years ago, "your gospel is too small . . . Come, follow me and learn mine!" What

about your gospel?

Let's begin by assessing the gospel that I learned in the past from my churches and theological education.

## **I. THE PROBLEM OF OUR MODERN GOSPELS**

Let's begin with this illustration:

SLIDE 2

What is this painting . . . . ???

Of course this the **ICONIC SYMBOL** of this . . . The Sistine Chapel by



Michelangelo.

SLIDE 3

BACK TO SLIDE 2

But let's do a little thought experiment, you and I. What if over years and years, even over centuries, all we ever viewed and discussed was this portion of the ceiling, the Hands? What if over time, an iconic symbol that was meant to fire our imaginations with the scene of the whole Sistine Chapel ceiling . . . Instead became the only part of the ceiling we ever discussed? And in time, it became the only part of the Ceiling we even knew about. What if we began to believe that the Hands were the whole of Michelangelo's masterpiece?

Stay with me! What if in our schools of art and art history, debates raged over the Hands - the meaning of the gap between them, the meaning of the active hand on the right and the passive hand on the left. What if "liberal" schools of thought emerged that doubted that Michelangelo painted these hands? Or that the hand on the right was the hand of a Deity - I mean what kind of deity has a hand? No, this is a humanist painting of two men . . . Or are they women? Over time, opposing

schools of art philosophy would take positions on the meaning of the Hands, and artists would be forced to choose which art “denomination” they aligned with.

And in the midst of the controversy and activity, the remarkable beauty and rich story of the entire Sistine Chapel ceiling would be lost.

I am proposing that something like this is what has happened with our modern evangelical gospels. For understandable reasons, iconic symbols like John 3:16, or Biblical statements like “Christ died for our sins” have been misunderstood as the whole. Just as you cannot fully appreciate the meaning and beauty of the Hands without the vision of the whole Sistine Chapel ceiling, we do not fully appreciate the strength and beauty of our gospel unless we gain an understanding of the whole - the whole which Jesus called the gospel of the kingdom.

Now in our next hour I’ll present a positive vision of the whole. Right now I’d like to present the weaknesses of our reduced gospels, weaknesses that result in weak churches and weak kingdom expansion. These are weaknesses that I believe most working pastors recognize in our churches. I don’t know that we always realize that the source is our reduced gospel. There is an understandable historical reason for our reduced gospel, for mistaking the iconic part for the whole. And most

importantly, there is the Biblical evidence that we have neglected the gospel that Jesus and His apostles preached. Before I tackle those two issues in order, let's recognize that there is not simply one modern, reduced gospel.

#### SLIDE 4

I am indebted for this graphic to Bill Hull, a U.S pastor and author, and his blog post on his website [www.thebonhoefferproject.com](http://www.thebonhoefferproject.com). We don't suffer from just one reduced gospel. We can actually identify many that are preached today, and on this graphic Pastor Hull identifies five. I don't claim this as exhaustive or finally authoritative, but it is a helpful way for us to think about the messages we proclaim.

The first gospel he identifies is the Forgiveness Only gospel. This is the gospel I grew up hearing in the southern Bible Belt of the United States. Three times a week I heard a call to repentance for the forgiveness of my sins. Christ was always presented as Savior but was rarely taught as Lord. And for heaven's sake we never talked about the Holy Spirit. This gospel produces saved people who believe that they are done. So until they die, their main job is to attend church and live morally. It tends to produce Pharisees. A few special people may be called to go and do missions. Everyone else sits passively and puts some money in the

offering plate.

Now a brief caveat before we proceed further. I admit that for the sake of time I am drawing cartoons of these gospels. And you'll have a chance to take me to task in a few minutes if I paint with too broad a brush and do a disservice to one of these positions. That being said, I do believe these cartoons are legitimate.

The second gospel is the Left or Liberal gospel, what has been called the Social Gospel. Help the needy. God prefers the poor. We can't make claims about absolute Truth as all truth is relative. We no longer see the Bible as an inspired book. Rather we devote ourselves to humanitarian concerns. Churches that have followed this path have essentially become non-profits with a thin coat of religious paint. The churches themselves tend to become social clubs.

The third is the Prosperity Gospel. I don't know how popular this is in Quebec or Canada, but it's highly popular in the States. Many, perhaps most, of the famous TV preachers with huge followings preach this Gospel. It's essentially white magic. You can manipulate God into doing what you want Him to do - which is send you lots of money. Or with proper amounts of psychological faith, you can obligate Him to heal your child or rescue your marriage. You are in control. God is the genie

in the bottle granting your wishes.

Then there's the Consumer Gospel. This is the temptation for many evangelical churches like my own. This gospel arises from the conviction that you first have to preach to people's felt needs and desires, and then later you can disciple them into the teaching they really need. This is the Gospel of "how to" - how to have a perfect marriage, how to raise happy children, how to have a successful career, how to achieve the American dream. Getting all this in a moral, Christian sort of way of course. This gospel does not transform us by the renewing of our minds. It instead endorses our immature consumerist desires and leaves behind weak, culturally accommodated Christians.

Lastly, there's the Right Gospel, as in "we're right and everyone else is wrong." This is a gospel that majors on doctrinal accuracy, because after all it's the truth that sets us free. This gospel usually lacks humility, although it can define humility really well. Whether of the reformed or dispensational variety, we are quite sure that after 2000 years of theological discussion, our tribe has finally gotten it "right." I meet the Christians these churches produce, and their arrogance is ugly to a watching world and to their fellow believers.

And then of course Bill Hull makes the case for the Kingdom Gospel,

and here he and I are in happy agreement, but that's for the next hour.

These are not airtight categories of course. The evangelical circles I know in the States are a blend of the Forgiveness, Consumer and Right gospels. Most of my peers in conservative evangelical circles stay far away from Left and Prosperity gospels. You could also make the case that each of these reduced gospels contain at least a kernel of truth, small though it may be. But my task today is not to dissect each of these. But certainly each one is a reduced gospel. Each one presents one part of the Sistine Chapel, some have more of the ceiling, some have only a small part of it. Some have more of the truth of the gospel of the kingdom, some have only a sliver or two. But none of them are the message that Jesus and his apostles preached that took the Roman world by storm.

Forgiveness is of course at the center of the Gospel, and Christ's atoning work on the cross is the core of our faith. The Left or Social gospel is exemplified in Christ's own healing ministry and is a crucial part of the church's ministry. The Prosperity gospel gets at least this much right - that God does want to bless us and He intends that there be no poor among His people. Even the Consumer gospel is right that we have felt needs, and the teaching of Christ and his apostles does offer us wisdom for a better life. And the Right gospel is correct that right thinking is

important, and that the renewing of our minds is indeed part of our salvation. And yet these gospels and perhaps others we could identify, only provide part of the picture we desperately need for strong churches that lead the expansion of the kingdom of God.

And here I may need to make some stipulations. In a courtroom trial or legal case often the lawyers will make stipulations at the beginning of the trial, so that they don't have to keep entering disclaimers or arguments over and over again. Let me make some stipulations since most of you don't know me, or my ministry or my teaching. I am a Jesus guy. I believe He is the Christ, the eternal and only begotten Son of God, and is the only way, truth and life. I am a Bible guy. The Bible is the inspired, inerrant, infallible trustworthy written word of God. I believe you must be born again. I can say the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed and mean them. I can sign the statement of faith of evangelical seminaries like Trinity Evangelical Divinity School or Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary without hesitation. I am not interested in being labelled conservative or progressive. I am interested in being devoted to Christ, the eternal Word of God, and becoming more and more Biblical in my theology and in my teaching.

I say all this because it is possible that some of you are already uncomfortably suspicious that I may be some kind of liberal calling the

Gospel into question. I am not. But neither do I believe that I am finished being transformed by the renewing of my mind, nor that I have exhausted the depths of Biblical teaching and theology. I want to keep learning, and I'm eager to learn from you as well today.

I do believe that our reduced modern gospels, and the blends of those gospels, are weak and are insufficient for our calling as pastors and for the church in these times. Let's now take a brief look at two weaknesses of our partial gospels.

The first of these is the historical weakness that has led to a reduced gospel.

#### SLIDE 5

Here's our friend Martin Luther, to whom we Protestants owe a great debt, and perhaps even our Catholic friends can appreciate the clarity to their own theology his protests brought. And yet there's a problem.

First a word about the Context of the Reformation. It was a Christendom context, very unlike our pluralistic secularized context today. Centered of course in Europe, the known or civilized world from a Eurocentric



point of view was a Christian world. Politics and economics had become entwined with the medieval church. Popes and bishops participated in king making and nation building, and kept armies and banks themselves. Everyone was a Christian. The only question that mattered as the Reformation progressed was what kind of Christian are you? Are you Catholic, Protestant or one of those Anabaptists? Very soon among the Protestants it became crucial to know what kind of Protestant are you? Are you Reformed? Lutheran? Zwinglian? Anglican? A Hussite, Mennonite or Moravian?

In complete betrayal of the teachings of Jesus, European Christians soon began to kill one another over these questions and the underlying entanglements with worldly wealth and power. Catholics were killing Protestants, Protestants were killing Catholics, and everybody was killing Anabaptists. The religious wars following the Reformation were and still are today an ugly blight on the reputation of Jesus and his church.

I'm sure you know your European history better than I do, so I'll not rehearse these facts any further. My point in bringing this up? The Reformation seedbed of our protestant evangelical theology and gospels was decidedly NOT a missionary context. This is important! The whole of Europe was already considered a Christian parish. The only question

was market share. Setting aside the violence for a moment, the arguments were in-house arguments between professing Christians. While much was disputed, there were also a lot of shared assumptions across the battle lines about God, Christ, the Bible, the church, afterlife, heaven and hell, and salvation. Unlike the context of Christ and his apostles, and unlike our context in North America, it was NOT a missionary context in which the church faced a dominant unbelieving culture. Rather, Christianity WAS the dominating culture. It was Christendom. The medieval church, a Christianized Europe and its politics, and the kingdom of God were conflated. And confused with one another. After all, the kingdom of God was already present as demonstrated by every cathedral or church in every town square.

The Controversy. In this non-missional setting, the controversies quickly zeroed in NOT on a wholistic understanding of the gospel of the kingdom, but on one particular and very important part of the gospel - Justification. Battle lines were quickly drawn around the role of the church, the sacraments, the priesthood, the Bible and the individual conscience in achieving justification of sinners before a holy God. Battles raged over indulgences, the priesthood of all believers, the freedom of the will, transubstantiation and consubstantiation and symbolic understandings of the sacraments, purgatory, baptism, the role of faith, the role of tradition - all tightly contained within a frame of legal justification before a holy Judge and how to achieve it.

Are these crucial questions? Of course! Mais oui! Is a Biblical understanding of justification still crucial today? Of course! Is it still important to correct false teaching and misunderstandings, so that the church knows that “it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not your own doing, it is a gift of God and not a result of works?” Yes! Is the cross at the center? Is propitiation and atonement at the center? Yes!

But please consider this - in the controversies and in the literal blood spilled around them, our Protestant evangelical gospel got too small. To go back to my Sistine Chapel illustration, justification through the cross of Christ is at the center of the grand painting . . . But it is NOT the whole painting. It is the fulfillment, the climax, the indispensable center . . . But it is NOT the whole story. The controversies have continued for 500 years, and over that time these important issues have narrowed our understanding of the full rich kingdom gospel. The frame of our picture is too small. We need a bigger frame. We need the whole ceiling.

The Consequences have been severe. As we have built our protestant evangelical theologies around justification and each denomination’s distinctive understanding of justification, we have built static systems of

theology well suited for winning arguments in Christendom, but not well suited for winning the hearts and souls of secular societies. Our in-house arguments around the fine points of justification are incomprehensible at best to our dominant Western culture. At worst they look ugly and harmful to people, like Nero fiddling while Rome burned.

Our reduced gospels do make a place for missions. We'll have a missions department in our theological schools, separate of course from our systematic theology department. Because our Christendom gospels shaped in controversy with other Christians are not missional in their DNA! So you don't get a vision for mission from our systematics, so its necessary to have a missions department. Contrast that with the message and movement of Jesus and his apostles which swept the Roman world without volumes of systematics on justification. They lived in a mission context, a small David up against the Goliath of the most dominating culture the world had seen to that point. And we now live in such a context again, up against an unbelieving Western culture the most powerful and widespread that the world had ever seen.

We need a dynamic missional gospel. Not the reduced static gospels derived from Christendom controversies. We need to do what those Reformers did. Go back to the Biblical sources and do fresh Biblical

theology for our context, which is decidedly not a 16<sup>th</sup> century European Christendom context. Our Reformation forebears left us a great legacy of historical theology. We now need to follow their example and do our best to recover the full Biblical gospel of Jesus. The gospel of the kingdom which is missional in its DNA and produces an effective missional church for a missionary context.

## SLIDE 6

To finish up our first session, I'd like to sketch the most serious problem with our varied reduced gospels. They are not Biblical enough. They are partially Biblical, some more so than others. But none do justice to the Biblical revelation. And if you and I are Bible people, surely we want to align ourselves as much as possible with God's revelation. Further, we are Jesus followers aren't we? I am pretty simple minded about such things. It seems to me that if I'm a follower of Jesus, that I should learn the message that He preached and teach that. I also assume that He was pretty good at training His apostles . . . Would you agree? If so, I should be paying attention to what they proclaimed and how they proclaimed the message that founded churches across the Roman Empire.

Now in our next session, I'll be filling out my understanding of Jesus' gospel of the kingdom. Right now, I'd like to identify, with Biblical

evidence, two glaring differences in our gospels from His gospel. If I'm right about these differences, then you and I need to repent and return to the way and message of Christ and His apostles.

The first of these problems is in how we frame up our gospel proclamations. We frame them up within a view of the afterlife, marked by the two destinations of heaven and hell. All of the reduced gospels we reviewed a few minutes ago frame up their message this way. Now in some cases they react against the idea of hell and dismiss it as myth or fable not worthy of modern thinking Christians. But it still shapes their thought, even in rejection. Or they promise all the blessings of heaven now if you'll just give money to their ministries. Or they assure you that your final destination of heaven is secured by accepting Jesus so now you can get on with pursuing the American dream. And of course in the Forgiveness and Right gospels about all you hear about are the destinations of heaven and hell and God's sovereign choices in who is going where. But in any event the conceptual framework is one that says religion has primarily to do with what happens when you die. This approach to our faith has much more to do with Dante's *Inferno* and a medieval Christendom imagination than it does with the teaching of Jesus.

A few points need to be made here. First, let me affirm the realities of

heaven and hell, and the precious promise that when we followers of Jesus leave this life we will be with the Lord in the next. Also notice that the phrase “kingdom of heaven” used often in the Gospel of Matthew is not just referring to the afterlife. It is the Jewish way of saying “kingdom of God” and includes the afterlife, the before-afterlife, and the after-afterlife in the new heavens and earth. Notice the Lord’s Prayer. Heaven is the realm in which God’s will is done, ie His kingdom, and we are to pray that this realm extends to earth, to this life, to the before-afterlife. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Have you also noticed that Jesus talks about hell only with religious people? Well actually He talks about *sheol* which is the Jewish conception of the realm of the dead. And He talks about an actual place called Gehenna which represents a miserable burning trash pile full of regret and suffering. One of the problems with translating both *sheol* and Gehenna into the word “hell” is that we think more of Dante than we do of Jesus - underground caverns full of fire and devils. You’ll need to check me on this, but I cannot find one instance of Jesus threatening a sinner, a whore, a cheat, a tax collector or a pagan Roman enemy soldier with hell fire. Instead He brings up the idea of horrible punishment for religious Jews who in their smugness and complacency have failed to truly love God with their whole heart and have failed to love their poor neighbors as themselves. This observation alone should give us pause. If Jesus didn’t preach hell to prostitutes and pagans, what did He preach?

“Repent” - not because you’re hanging by a thread over hellfire, nor because you’ll get a cloud and a harp in the afterlife - but because “the Kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matt. 4:17). Let me quote here from George Eldon Ladd who was professor of Exegesis and New Testament Theology at Fuller Seminary for many years. I recommend a collection of his talks and sermons first published sixty years ago entitled “The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God.” Here’s how he puts it:

“Then came Jesus of Nazareth with the announcement “Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17). This theme of the kingdom of God was central in His mission. His teaching was designed to show men how they might enter the Kingdom of God (Matt 5:20 and 7:21). His mighty works were intended to prove that the Kingdom of God had come upon them (Matt 12:28). His parables illustrated to His disciples the truth about the Kingdom of God (Matt 13:11). And when He taught His followers to pray, at the heart of their petition were the words “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10). On the eve of His death, He assured His disciples that He would yet share with them the happiness and the fellowship of the Kingdom (Luke 22:22-30). And He promised that He would appear again on the earth in glory to bring the blessedness of the Kingdom to those for whom it was



prepared (Matt 25:31,34).”

And in all of Paul’s preaching and letters recorded in the New Testament, I find only one reference to “the punishment of eternal destruction” in 2 Thessalonians 1, directed at those who have afflicted and hindered those who are “worthy of the kingdom of God”. So again, my point is not to deny the realities of heaven and hell. My point is to make the Biblical observation that neither Jesus nor His apostles framed up their preaching to the lost in terms of a heaven or hell afterlife. Rather, they framed up the decision to be made as deciding to live under the life-giving rule of God in His Kingdom, or to continue to be enslaved in the kingdom of darkness (Colossians 1).

Second, we sell a transaction, while Jesus and His apostles told a Story. Our reduced gospels propose a transaction, a trade. Accept Jesus and receive eternal life in heaven. Be a good moral person and go to heaven when you die. Give God a seed-faith gift and you will receive financial blessings. Learn these Biblical tips and you’ll have a happy life. Get your doctrine right and you’ll prove that you’re one of the predestined. With what fruit?

There was a recent study in the United States of young adults who professed to be Christians. Moralistic therapeutic deism (MTD) is a term

that was first introduced in the book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2005) by sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton. The term is used to describe what they consider to be the common religious beliefs among American youth. The book is the result of the research project the "National Study of Youth and Religion". The authors find that many young people believed in several moral statutes not exclusive to any of the major world religions. It is this combination of beliefs that they label Moralistic Therapeutic Deism:

- ◆ A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
- ◆ This god wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- ◆ The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- ◆ This god does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when needed to resolve a problem.
- ◆ Good people go to heaven when they die.

These points of belief were compiled from interviews with approximately 3,000 teenagers. Do any of us recognize this form of religion in our churches? In our people of whatever age? I do.

In spite of the fact that we may be saying some of the right words, our young people are hearing and believing what our reduced gospels are telling them.

## SLIDE 7

When Jesus and His apostles “gospelled”, that is proclaimed their message, they did not sell anything. Rather, they told a Story, a Story about a Kingdom that was so big it could encompass all the concerns of life. A Story so compelling that millions turned away from their former rebellion to become obedient to the King of this Kingdom. They told the Story of how God is once again reigning on earth through His appointed King, Jesus the Messiah, for the blessing of all who will repent and enter this kingdom.

Let me demonstrate this. First, simply notice the four gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. John tells us specifically in John 20:30-31 that his Gospel is written so that “you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” He does this by telling us the story, beginning with the eternal Word of God who was with God in the beginning. The other three Gospel writers all do the same - they proclaim the message to us by telling us the story of Jesus the Messiah, who is the climax of the long story that began in

Eden, continued through the kingdom of Israel, and is now fulfilled in Jesus, the long awaited Messiah.

Further, when Jesus joins the two discouraged disciples walking back to Emmaus on Easter Sunday, he does not invite them to “accept Him as Savior” and so go to heaven. Rather, “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” And their hearts burned within them as He told them His story.

At Stephen’s martyrdom in Acts 7, Stephen “full of the Holy Spirit” gossiped his killers by telling them the story beginning with Abraham, the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets.

When the gospel broke through to Gentiles in Cornelius’s house, Acts 10, Peter told the story of Jesus, the one to whom “all the prophets bear witness.”

Jesus and his apostles proclaimed the good news, the gospel, that God’s ancient promise to Abraham to bless all the families of the earth, was now being kept as Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled the story of Israel in his own life and ministry, inaugurating once again the rule of God on earth.

The Kingdom of God. And they did it by teaching the beautiful story of God's long mission to push back the kingdom of darkness and bring in His kingdom of light and life. We should do the same.

We could talk about other weaknesses in our reduced gospels, such as the focus on souls instead of Jesus' focus on the whole person, bringing salvation to body, soul and mind. Or how our gospels confine salvation to the so called spiritual realm and too often offer no meaning or purpose to our daily lives, our jobs, our vocations, our play and recreation, our money, or our education - other than doing these things in a moral fashion until we die and go to heaven. Jesus and his apostles, on the other hand, taught that because of the Kingdom, when Jesus delivers the kingdom to God the Father and the last enemy death is defeated, that ALL of our life, work, activities, and labor will not be in vain, but will rather bear fruit now and in the resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15. This is a gospel big enough for all of human life. It is a Gospel big enough for the world.

SLIDE 8

## QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS OR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What was the gospel that you heard and that brought you to faith in Christ? Do you see it or some form of it in the 5 reduced gospels named in the presentation?
2. Before this presentation, what was your understanding of what Jesus meant by “the gospel of the kingdom?”
3. What is your opinion of the Historical Weakness that was presented? Has the Reformation actually reduced our gospel?
4. In the Biblical Weakness portion, the presenter claimed that when we evangelize, or “gospel”, that we do it differently than Jesus and His apostles. Why did the presenter think this is a problem, and do you agree with him?
5. The presenter is claiming that our gospel is the foundation of our church, and that if the foundation is too small or weak, then our church will be small and weak. Why do you think that this is correct or incorrect? Can you offer Biblical support for your understanding?

## **II. WHAT IS JESUS' GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM?**

### SLIDE 8

While I don't know for sure about the Quebecois, I do know that Americans don't think in terms of kings and kingdoms. We think in terms of elected officials who we can vote out, or impeach if a President really misbehaves. In fact, we Americans fought a revolution to get rid of an English king. Even worse, I come from a part of the United States that seceded from a legally elected government and fought a bloody civil war in the cause of self-determination. Now we won the Revolution, but the South lost the Civil War, and both events give one a window into the mind of Americans and southern Americans like myself when it comes to sovereign kings who claim a divine right to rule. We don't like them.

I have a particularly bad case of this. Many of my friends and family love to watch BBC TV series about the British aristocracy or the British royalty. I can't stand to watch them. A lot of my fellow Americans were fascinated by every scene of the recent royal wedding between Prince Harry and Meaghan Markle. I made a point of ignoring it. For my part, when trapped by family into watching a BBC fictional show or a real royal wedding, I usually grumble out something like this, "I thought we fought a revolution to get rid of these arrogant kings and aristocrats." Perhaps then you can appreciate that I have been on a steep learning

curve as I've attempted to understand the Biblical view of God the King and His Kingdom.

So I've had to go back to basics regarding kings and kingdoms. What exactly constitutes a kingdom? What do you think are the essential components of a kingdom? I submit to you that there are three, and that one of these three takes precedence over the other two.

Every kingdom has a realm, a dominion, a land, a sphere of rule and influence. Every kingdom also has subjects, those people who live in the realm, the land, and owe their allegiance to their sovereign. And this of course is the third component of a kingdom - a king. Or a king and a queen, or a queen. But a sovereign ruler whose word is law within the realm, and to whom the subjects of the kingdom owe their allegiance and obedience. A king, a realm, and a people. These are the irreducible three components of a kingdom.

But Biblically speaking, they are not all three of equal rank or importance. Often when we moderns do think of a kingdom, we think first of the land, the geography, the country, the nation, the realm. But this is not how the inspired authors of our Bible thought first about a kingdom. For the Biblical writers, a kingdom is first of all, essentially the sovereign ruling authority of its king. The realm and the king's subjects are secondary. The primary meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words translated into English as "kingdom" is the rank, authority and sovereignty exercised by a king. His rule, his power, his authority, his preeminence constitutes the kingdom.



Psalm 103:19 puts it like this, “The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.” Note how its phrased, “his kingdom rules”. His rule IS his kingdom. His rule constitutes his kingdom.

Or in Daniel 2:37 we read “You O king, the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the might, and the glory.” The synonyms for the kingdom are not the geographical boundaries of his land or the number of his subjects. The synonyms for the kingdom are the king’s power, the king’s might, and and the king’s glory.

We find another example in a parable that Jesus told, recorded in Luke 19. In this parable, Jesus says “A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom (the Greek word *basilea*) and then return.” As the parable progresses, we learn the nobleman already had property and money and servants at hand. He didn’t have to journey to receive land and subjects. In fact he had to leave them behind to go to the far country, entrusting his wealth to his servants, which is the main point of the parable. He went into the far country to receive the authority to rule, to receive his *basilea*, his kingdom. Some English translations have “kingly power” for *basilea* instead of “kingdom” here, which is closer to the primary meaning.

So to say it plainly, the Kingdom of God is God’s kingship, His right to rule, His supreme authority. These attributes of the King constitute the fundamental kingdom. A kingdom which does indeed have a realm

and a people, but they are secondary. The flow from the King's ruling authority. The King is primary. We've already referred to the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 a couple of times today. What does it mean for God's kingdom to come? Well it means for "his will to be done". The kingdom is the king's will, his rule, his word.

Here's how Dr. Ladd puts it in his book I referenced earlier:

"The Kingdom of God is basically the rule of God. It is God's reign, the divine sovereignty in action . . . The Kingdom of God is, then, the realization of God's will, and the enjoyment of the accompanying blessings . . . The Bible conceives of the entire sweep of human history as resting in the hand of God, but it looks for the final realization of God's Kingdom in a realm "beyond history", *ie* in a new and different order of existence. Yet while this is true, there is a very real and very vital sense in which God has already manifested His reign, His will, His Kingdom in the coming of Christ in the flesh, by virtue of which we may experience the life of the Kingdom here and now."

Now we're making progress towards defining the Gospel of the Kingdom, as we're beginning to understand what the Bible means by the phrase the kingdom of God. Let's see this in the missionary preaching of the Apostle Paul.

SLIDE 9

In Acts 13 Paul and Barnabas are on the first Christian missionary journey, and they come to the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. Asked by the ruler of the synagogue if they have a word for the congregation, Paul rises to his feet and he “gospels” them. He announces the good news of Jesus the Messiah. And as we saw in the last hour, he does this by rehearsing the story of Israel, now fulfilled in Jesus. He rehearses how God chose Israel, delivered them from Egypt, gave them King David, and from David’s offspring God has brought a savior, Jesus. Paul announces in verse 32 “we bring you the good news (which is of course what “gospel” means) that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus.” And the story that Paul tells at some length that day is a story that has a kingdom framework.

This slide is taken from the wonderful book by Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God*. Wright points out that Paul’s sermon has a kingdom structure of God the sovereign King who chooses Israel His people, and promises through Abraham a land of blessing. A land where He will be their God, they will be His people, and He will dwell with them forever. A king, a land, a people. A kingdom. This kingdom is now brought to pass by Jesus the promised savior being raised from the dead. Paul is preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom. He is announcing that God is ruling again, now, not just in the future, through Jesus the appointed Messiah. The Kingdom has been inaugurated.

I would also note the presence of other kingdoms in Paul’s sermon

that day. This will be important for us in a few minutes. God led them out of the kingdom of Egypt with his uplifted arm. He destroyed seven nations or kingdoms in the land of Canaan. And even in the day of Jesus and Paul, those who lived in Jerusalem and their rulers opposed God's chosen one, Jesus. The kingdoms of this world are opposed to the rule of God, and the kingdom of God is opposed to their rebellion.

Paul thought in kingdom terms when he thought about the gospel. We can see this again when he addresses a very different audience, the Greek skeptics and philosophers of Athens, in Acts 17.

SLIDE 10 - this slide is also from *The Mission of God*

Paul is going to present the Gospel of the Kingdom to the men of Athens, who he says are very religious in every way (17:22). Because they are Greeks and not Jews, like any good preacher or missionary, he contextualizes his message for them. Instead of referring to Israel, Abraham and Moses - Jewish icons - Paul begins to talk about "the God who made the world and everything in it." The Creator and the Earth. And how he made "from one man every nation of mankind." Humanity. Again what I want you to see is that Paul's gospel proclamation is structured or framed by the kingdom. A King - the Creator. A Realm - the world and everything in it. Subjects - every nation of mankind. From this kingdom perspective Paul now introduces the gospel announcement that this Creator King will judge the world in

righteousness, and that He will do this “by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance by raising him from the dead.” (17:31)

Where did Paul get this kingdom framework for the gospel. Well in Galatians 2 he claims he was taught his gospel by the Risen Christ himself. Then where did Christ get this kingdom framework? Without doubting for a minute the divinity of Christ and his oneness with God the Father and knowledge he may have gained from him, Jesus of Nazareth got his kingdom understanding from His “bible”, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings as we saw in his teaching on the road to Emmaus. Jesus’ Bible, our Old Testament, is structured around God’s kingdom. Jesus as a faithful Jewish man and especially as a Rabbi had the Torah memorized. His mind as a fully human man was steeped in the kingdom structure of the Old Testament.

SLIDE 11 - this is from my doctoral thesis *Kingdom Outposts*

We see this kingdom structure from the very beginning, from Genesis 1. God the Creator makes humanity in His image, male and female He creates them. This idea of being made in the image of God is ancient kingdom language. In the ancient Near East, a high king who ruled a vast domain would appoint lower kings to “rule in his image”. That is, those lower kings were to rule over some portion of the high king’s domain, and they were to rule it according to the will, the wishes, the

law of the high king.

In Genesis 1, the high king of the universe sets in place a lower king and queen, men and women, Adam and Eve and he instructs them to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and SUBDUE it and have DOMINION over . . . Every living thing.” Did you catch the kingly language. Subdue. Dominion. This is royal, ruling language. Mankind was intended to rule over the earth God’s way. With love and care, just as He had created it. The whole earth was intended to be the kingdom of God, ruled over by His appointed lower kings and queens . . . Us.

#### SLIDE 12

We don’t have time to unpack this crowded slide, but it is intended to represent the unfolding story of the entire Old Testament, the Bible of Jesus and His apostles like Paul. It follows the kingdom structure of King, Subjects and Land throughout the Old Testament. You know this Story. At first all is well, the king and queen of creation, Adam and Eve, enjoy fellowship with God their High King. The serpent, who we find out later represents all evil opposed to the High King, enters the story. Eve is deceived, Adam sins, and paradise is lost. The king and queen rebel against the High King and his will, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Conflict, pain, shame and blame, murder and violence, and immorality quickly enter the story in the first 11 chapters of our Bible. The kingdom of earth is now in full rebellion

against its rightful High King.

But the High King of heaven desires to rescue His rebellious kingdom and save them from their own destruction. Their broken, fallen understanding of good and evil is creating chaos and suffering. And still does today. So God the King embarks on a mission. He is going to win His kingdom back. He is going to save humanity. He embarks on a mission to bless the world, not destroy the world. This is what theologians call the *Missio Dei*, the Mission of God.

God calls a man, Abraham, and makes him a kingdom promise. He reveals his covenant name to Abraham, YHWH. KING. He promises that through Abrahams seed, his descendants, all the families of the earth will be blessed. SUBJECTS. He promises a land for Abraham's descendants. REALM. A KINGDOM. In that land His chosen people will live God's way, the kingdom way. All the other nations of the world will see this unique chosen nation. They will stream to this land, to Zion, and they will learn the ways of the kingdom of God. Through Abraham and his seed, all the earth will be saved. Saved by coming back under the rightful rule of the High King, God Himself.

Here's how the Apostle Paul puts it starting in Galatians 3:7.

“Know then that it is those of faith who are the descendants of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles (all people) by faith, PREACHED THE GOSPEL beforehand to Abraham, saying “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then those

who are of faith (of Jesus the Messiah) are blessed, along with Abraham the man of faith. [This Jesus was crucified, becoming a curse for us by hanging on a tree} so that in Jesus the Messiah the blessing of Abraham might come to all people, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”

The promise to Abraham, the *Missio Dei*, put into motion the long plan of God to save the world through Israel and her promised Messiah.

And note this carefully: the world is saved by once again coming under the rightful rule of the High King and His appointed king, King Jesus. We are saved, the world is saved, by repenting from listening to the serpent and our own notions of good and evil. And instead of giving our allegiance and loyalty to any other ruler, any other idea, any other cause, any other wish or law - we repent and give our whole heart, soul and mind in obedient allegiance to Jesus the King. The new Adam appointed by God the Father, the High King, to re-establish the kingdom of God on earth, as it is in heaven.

We are now in a position to more fully answer the question, “What is the Gospel of the Kingdom?”

SLIDE 13

The shortest version of the Gospel of the Kingdom is found in the



New Testament affirmation that “Jesus is Lord!” Now, this is like the hands of the Sistine Chapel. It’s an iconic, symbolic very short affirmation that is meant to invoke the longer whole story of the restoration of the Kingdom of God, from Genesis until now. We’re meant to think of the whole Sistine Chapel when we hear this symbolic statement “Jesus is Lord”.

“Lord” has lost its meaning for us moderns. We hear it as a term of respect and perhaps, therefore, some soft authority. This is not biblically accurate. In the kingdom of Rome, or the Roman Empire, the fundamental statement of allegiance of a loyal subject of the empire was “Caesar is Lord”. This meant that Caesar was king, Caesar was emperor, Caesar was divine and all allegiance, loyalty and obedience was to be given to him. It was a commitment to a king and his kingdom.

So when the first Christians affirmed “Jesus is Lord” they didn’t simply mean that they respected Jesus, or that they had a high opinion of him. No, they meant “Jesus is King and Caesar is not!” They meant that we are leaving the kingdom of Caesar, we are repenting of living in the kingdom of darkness under Satan’s rule, and we now give our allegiance to Jesus the Messiah. He is our king. We take our orders from him. We enjoy the blessing of his loving and wise rule. If we live we live for Him, if we die we die for Him. Jesus is King.

When you and I move beyond our reduced gospels and the transaction deal we may have struck with God, and move into a fuller understanding of the Gospel of the Kingdom, this becomes our

affirmation too. Jesus is King! And that means that the President is not my king, my allegiance to the United States is not my king, the Prime Minister is not my king, the Queen Mother is not my king, democracy is not my king, capitalism is not my king, socialism is not my king, freedom is not my king, money is not my king, my children are not my king, happiness is not my king . . . Jesus is my King! This is what Jesus is calling us to when He says “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” Allegiance of our whole lives. Our families, our jobs, our businesses, our careers, our education, our opportunities, our suffering . . . Everything submitted in service and obedience to our loving King who desires nothing more than to save us from our own foolishness, trying to be our own little kings and queens, and so bless us with His wise rule.

So let’s take a few minutes and rethink Jesus Christ from this perspective. First, you do know that Christ is not his last name, right? Christ is a title, not a name. It is the Greek version of the Hebrew word Messiah. The title Messiah is like the hands again. Just that word is meant to invoke the big painting, the long story of Israel, Abraham, Moses, David and the Prophets. Messiah is meant to make us think of the promised son of David who would rule forever, 2 Samuel 7, and the son of Man from Daniel 7 who would defeat evil kingdoms and be supernaturally vindicated at God’s right hand. Messiah is meant to make us think of the promised kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. So when we read or say “Jesus Christ” we are really saying “Jesus the Messiah” and we should mean is “Jesus is my King and no

one else is!”

With that in mind, let’s briefly take a fresh look at Jesus the King. First, **The King’s Life**. Jesus was born into the kingdom of Rome. And immediately the puppet king of Rome, Herod, tried to kill him, murdering the infants of Bethlehem. As Jesus grew in favor with God and man, he was tempted by Satan, the ultimate enemy of God’s kingdom, and was offered all the kingdoms of the world if he would only give his allegiance to a false king and his evil kingdom. As Jesus embarked on his mission of proclaiming the good news of God’s kingdom, he began to demonstrate that he, not Caesar or Satan or the Jewish rulers of Israel, was the true king, the long awaited Messiah. His healing ministry demonstrated his kingship over the misery and disease that our rebellion has brought on mankind. He can feed 5000 with a few loaves of bread because he is the wealthy king who provides for his people. He walks on water and calms storms, because just like his Father, he is king over his creation. The whole creation is his realm.

He teaches constantly about the kingdom. He promises that if we’ll understand his surprising teaching on the kingdom, then we can go into the old storehouse of the Bible and bring out new treasure, new understanding. (Matt. 13:52) Why is his teaching surprising? Faithful Jews of his day were in fact expecting the kingdom of God. They were expecting a warrior king, the son of David. They were expecting a supernatural spectacular king like the son of Man. This Messiah would overthrow the pagan Gentiles with violence, with fire and sword, and

would set the nation of Israel free from all human tyranny. Jesus taught as one having authority, and his announcement, his gospel of the kingdom was not what they expected.

He said the ultimate enemy was not Rome, or Greek philosophy, or the pagan Gentiles who the Jews called “dogs.” The ultimate enemy is the unseen power behind all the worldly thrones. The ultimate enemies are sin, death and the Satan. These are the rebellious powers of this dark world. These are the false rulers who enslave all mankind in sin and the fear of death. And he came to defeat the real enemies.

Israel had forgotten its kingdom assignment. Israel had come to hate the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans. Israel had forgotten that they were chosen to join the *Missio Dei*, to be God’s unique people and shine a light into a dark world, to bring the Gentiles to Zion, to the city of God. Israel had forgotten that they were the chosen people not to condemn the pagans, but to join the mission of God in saving the pagans.

Jesus would now fulfill Israel’s assignment. Jesus the Messiah would now do what Israel failed to do - He would open the door to salvation for all the families of the earth. But his kingdom, the true kingdom of God, would be a peaceable kingdom. It would not win the world with violence, compelling obedience. It would win the world with love and sacrifice. It would start small, like grain or a mustard seed. It would be hidden, like leaven in a loaf. The kingdom movement he would start, the church he would build, would slowly but surely spread his rule and the

blessings of the kingdom of God to all the earth.

But first there was something the true king had to do , that *only* he could do. Some believed the surprising message of Jesus' life. Many others scoffed or walked away, or began to plot his death.

**The King's Death.** The powers of this dark world did in fact kill God's appointed King, the Messiah. Roman political power, Roman military power, the religious and social power of the Jewish Sanhedrin, Pharisees and Sadducees brought their ultimate power to bear on Jesus, the power of death. But Jesus had already foretold that his kingdom conflict was not ultimately with these human kingdoms. His battle for supremacy was with the kingdom of darkness, with Satan the prince and power of the air. Jesus makes this very clear in Matthew 12, and notice the strong kingdom framework, and that evil is a kingdom:

Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? So if I cast out demons by the power of {Satan, as you've accused me of doing}, then by whom do your sons cast them out? They will be your judges.

BUT, if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast our demons, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you! Or [say it another way.] how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, *unless he first binds the strong man?* Then, he may indeed plunder his house!" Matt.

12:25-28.

Jesus atoning death on the cross is how he bound the strong man!  
This is what no one but Jesus understood. Before human evil and human suffering could be addressed and redeemed, the strong man of evil behind all the chaos of the world had to be defeated. Only then could the followers of Jesus begin to “plunder his goods” and turn back the kingdom of darkness in human affairs. Here’s how the Apostle Paul puts it in Colossians 2:12-15,

[H]aving been buried with [Messiah] in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in [Jesus].

Or the author of the sermon to the Hebrews puts it this way in Hebrews 2:14-17,

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and

deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

Through his atoning, propitiating death on the cross, Jesus took the worst that this fallen world can do, and he nailed our guilty sinful rebellion to the cross and by his death destroyed those who have the power of death, both seen and unseen rulers of this world. He bound the strong man, because the kingdom of God had come upon the world.

So when Paul is reminding the Corinthian church of the gospel he preached to them, he reminds them that “Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.” (1 Cor. 15:3) By now we should be aware that this is a summary statement, an iconic symbolic statement like the hands on the Sistine Chapel. I hope that now when you hear or say that “Jesus died for my sins” you understand that with much greater depth. With kingdom depth. It’s not just your personal moral failings for which He died, though they are certainly included. He died for you, but he didn’t *just* die for you. He died to defeat evil, Satan, the unseen principalities and powers that presently rule this world. He died for the forgiveness of humanity’s sin of rebellion against the true King of the

universe. He died to make atonement for us trying to be our own little kings and queens, our own little gods. He died to set us free from the tyranny of the false kings of sin, death and the devil.

**The King's Resurrection.** The work of King Jesus on the cross is incomplete without the work of His Father in raising Him from the dead. In the resurrection of Jesus we see the glorious future of humanity. Sin does not have the final word. Death does not have the final word. Evil does not have the final word. The empires and human kingdoms of this world do not have the final word. God has the final word, and He demonstrates this by raising his appointed messianic king from the dead. Now the Son of Man is vindicated and ascends to the right hand of the Almighty, as in Daniel 7. Without the Resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth is just a pious martyr, to be perhaps admired and pitied. With the Resurrection he is seen to truly be what the scoffers put on his cross, the king of the Jews, and therefore the King of the world.

Here's how Paul explains it in 1 Corinthians 15:12,

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 14 And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. 15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we



testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins . . . But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he delivers *the kingdom* to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet . . . Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

55 “O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But

thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor [in this life] is not in vain.

The Resurrection of the King is the hope of the world. It assures us that we have a future, this world has a future, and that death, sin and evil have no future. By now I hope your ears perked up at the phrase “our Lord Jesus Christ”. This too is the hands, but we should see the whole ceiling just from this phrase. Jesus the Messiah is the King of this world, vindicated by his resurrection, which seals the blessed fate of the world God loves, while sealing the destruction of sin and death. Thanks be to God!

**The King’s Movement.** This will be the topic of our third and last session today. This is the vision of us, of the followers of Jesus, the loyal subjects of the King. This is the vision of how we are meant to join God’s mission, now fulfilled in King Jesus, and extend the kingdom of God to the far corners of the earth through His people. Until the glory of God’s kingdom covers the earth. Until once again the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of God. Ancient Israel was chosen to participate in this *Missio Dei*, but they failed to be faithful. Their Messiah was faithful in their stead. We are now called to join the *Missio Dei* as He continues to win back His Kingdom, the whole earth. Will we

remain faithful? Since this is our topic in the next hour, I'll leave it for now, and let's look at the final point,

**The King's Ultimate Kingdom.** Because of our reduced gospels, many Christians misunderstand where history is going. In the southern United States there is an old folk hymn entitled "I'll Fly Away." In it we sing "some glad morning, when this life is o'er, I'll fly away! To that home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away." The sentiment is that we're going to get out of this old world, and spend eternity on those unearthly, celestial shores. The famous American evangelist of over 100 years ago, D.L. Moody also got this wrong. He taught that the world is like a burning ship, going down in the depths of the sea. We Christians are in the lifeboat of the church, and all we can do is drag in a few souls and row our way to heaven. Escaping the doomed ship of this world. This lifeboat theology is wrong and we need to repent of it.

The Biblical vision is often caricatured in our culture in the same way that hell is caricatured as caves full of fire with demons in red suits with pitchforks. We caricature our final destination as "heaven", understood as angels and clouds and harps and an unending church service . . . Which sounds more like hell to some people!

Now as I affirmed in the last hour, it is true that when we die in Christ, we are then with the Lord. No question, see Philippians 1:23 for instance. But this afterlife state is NOT our final destination, it is an intermediate state. As we say in 1 Corinthians 15, at the end the trumpet

will sound and King Jesus will return. He will judge the living and the dead. All will be raised, some to life and some to death. We will be resurrected, and here is the hard-to-believe mystery, we will once again have a body. But this time a body like His resurrection body. An imperishable, immortal body.

Not only that, but the whole creation which now groans as in childbirth, will be transformed. The effects of the serpent and our rebellion will be wiped away. Creation will once again be as God intended it, "Very Good!" As N.T. Wright says, "there is an after-afterlife." Here's how the Apostle John symbolizes it in The Revelation, chapter 21:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. [Did you hear the kingdom framework?] 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." 5 And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." 6 And he said to

me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. 7 The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

This is the destination of humanity and our world. Restoration. A new beginning. The blessings of living in the kingdom of God under His wise sovereign rule. When we die, you will only be parked on a cloud for a little while. Then in the Second Coming of the King and His Resurrection, you will live in the new heavens and the new earth. This is our Blessed Hope. And in this hope we can live this life, in which we often suffer, in which we sin and are sinned against, in which evil often seems to have the last word . . . But we know it doesn't.

So we can invest our lives and follow our King, knowing that “our labor is not in vain!” We will see the fruit of our lives in the new creation. In the meantime, we join the King's Movement and as He promised, together we do even greater works than He did. That is the topic of our next hour.

I'd like to close with this final quote:

SLIDE 16

The question is not whether the whole of our lives will be shaped by some grand story. The only question is which grand story will shape our lives. For the one who has heard Jesus' call to follow him, the call comes with a summons to enter the story of which he was the climactic moment—the story narrated in the Bible. It is an invitation to find our place in that story. The issue is urgent: only then can we submit to Scripture's authority; only then can we understand our missional identity; only then can we resist being absorbed into the dangerous idolatries of our time. The church needs pastors and leaders, and the academy needs scholars and teachers who are in the grip of this story, and discharge their task in a way that calls church members and students to find their place in the true story of the world.

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS OR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

1. Now how would you define a kingdom?
  
2. After this presentation, how would you answer our original question, “What is Jesus’ Gospel of the Kingdom?”
  
3. The presenter made the claim that the whole Biblical story from Genesis to Revelation is framed up with a kingdom frame, and presents in all its fullness the Gospel of the Kingdom. What are your thoughts about this claim?
  
4. “Jesus is King” Now that you understand more of the meaning of this affirmation, what did you learn new about the life and teaching of Jesus the Messiah?
  
5. What new insights or understandings did you gain about Jesus the King’s death on a cross and his resurrection?

### **III. THE VISION OF CHURCHES AS KINGDOM OUTPOSTS**

#### **SLIDE 17**

We are experiencing a noisy “Quiet Revolution” in America. Here’s my understanding of what sociologists have dubbed The Quiet Revolution here in Quebec. And please correct me in a few minutes if I get this wrong. Your province was for centuries robustly Catholic. Its education, its healthcare, its government and its daily life were dominated by the influence - for good or ill - of the Roman Catholic Church. In about 1960 participation in weekly Mass ran in the range of 60 to 70 percent, and the cultural institutions were firmly led by the church. Ten years later, weekly mass participation was less than 15 percent and falling. Education, healthcare, government and the province’s daily life were secularized. Quebec had out-Europed Europe. In only ten years.

Recently, the Prime Minister of Ireland made a similar comment



about that country. As you know, Ireland just voted to repeal the constitutional bans on abortion. In explaining the vote, the Prime Minister said his country had been going through a Quiet Revolution for the last twenty years.

Now, Americans being Americans our secular revolution is a lot noisier. But it is still a revolution. Christianity is ugly to increasing numbers of Americans and American institutions. Neither is it credible. From the outside its beliefs look superstitious, its behavior mean-spirited and its theology incomprehensible to the very people we are called to reach. We are at best considered beside the point, and at worst we are becoming the enemy. We are failing in our fundamental calling - to make Jesus and His message beautiful and believable. Through living and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Chuck is a friend of mine. He used to be a professing Christian, though he no longer wants to be associated with us. He's a successful artist - one of the "cultural creatives" so influential in the U.S.. He told me over lunch some time ago that he and his peers very much "needed Jesus and his ethic . . . but without the superstitious bits." His number is legion. And his type is growing not just among those who don't follow Christ, but among those who do but are dismayed by our ugliness, and are leaving our churches. I'll remind you of the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism religion we took a brief look at in the first hour. These are people intrigued by Jesus, but repelled by the church.

We have moved into a missionary context, not the Christendom

context we considered in the first hour. This means that we must recover the approach of Christ and His apostles in their missionary context. We need to go back to familiar passages of our Bibles and read them through missionary lenses. I've been making the case today that we must recover Jesus and His Apostles's Gospel of the Kingdom. That whole Gospel that is missional and missionary in its very bones and DNA. And read our Bibles through that lens and act accordingly. That Gospel of the Kingdom leads inevitably to seeing churches in a new way. To seeing them as Kingdom Outposts.

### **Invisible Churches or Kingdom Outposts?**

In theological jargon, the "invisible church" usually refers to the worldwide congregation of true believers known only to God. Regardless of denomination or public identification with Christianity, God knows those who are truly born of the Spirit, ie the invisible church.

I'd like to use that phrase here in a different way. I first noticed this phenomenon when doing a literature review on a theology of relief and development for my doctoral thesis. In the relief and development literature, whether secular or evangelical Christian, the "invisible church" is the only one you will find. In other words, the church is rarely mentioned in the literature, and when it comes time for serious proposals about how to address poverty and economic relief and development - the church is absent from those proposals. It is invisible.

Too often, the local church as an active agent is absent from discussions on economic development and the common good in society. This is understandable when coming from non-Christians. But it is a serious oversight when Christians are reflecting on the common good. The local church is meant to be far more than a ready source of volunteers and donations for other organizations. The church was never meant to abdicate responsibility for the common good to government agencies and nonprofits. The church is not simply a funding source for parachurch initiatives. The church is meant to be a kingdom outpost. (Among many places see Ephesians 3:10).

The local church understood as a distinct *polis* (a Greek word we get the english “politics” from), a distinct Jesus-centered society, as a “kingdom outpost” is curiously absent from serious discussions on achieving the development of a good society. We overlook the distinctive life of disciples of Jesus gathered in to local sub-societies (churches) as crucial agents for good in our broader pluralist society. Agents that are proactively living out a set of kingdom values that can influence the broader society - as salt preserves meat, or as yeast leavens a whole lump of dough.

Kingdom values should not be imposed or even expected of everyone in a democratic society. But we would insist that neither should we reduce the discussion to simply the Christian individual and government, business or nonprofits. The Biblical vision includes another actor in the play - the gathered community of God’s people, the church,

incarnating the Kingdom. (Philippians 2:12-18 for instance).

We are used to the idea that Christians are to model a distinctive sexual ethic, a distinctive moral ethic, a distinctive way of accepting and treating other human beings. We are not as used to the idea that we are to live out a distinctive economics. (See Luke 16,18,19 and 1 Timothy 6 for instance). The combination of ethics, relationships and economics creates a demonstration of the common good. So that the local church becomes a local kingdom-life demonstration project. A kingdom outpost.

An outpost that will be like a city set on a hill, [see slide] attracting the attention of a sinful, hurting, struggling world. That is the Biblical vision.

Ancient Israel's mission was to live out an ethic and an economy distinct from the Egyptian, Canaanite, Assyrian, or Babylonian kingdoms and their economies. (For instance see Leviticus 25). The vision laid out in the Old Testament is of an economy not built on slave labor, but on the stewardship of the gift of land given to clans, tribes and families. Land granted by the only Owner - King YHWH. (Exodus 19:5; Leviticus 25:23).

Nothing changes in the New Testament. While the broader cultural setting is now different - the Roman Empire - the mission of God's people is the same: to live out a distinctive Kingdom of God vision of morality, relationships and economics. A kingdom vision of the common good. A kingdom vision of human flourishing. A kingdom life together that will serve to make Jesus and His message beautiful and believable.

(See for instance Romans 14 & 15; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 8 and many others).

While there is no expectation of doing this perfectly (just read the apostles's letters to the first churches!) there is an expectation that in the new age of the Holy Spirit, the people of God now have the resources to live such a vision substantially. (2 Peter 1:3). The vision of Jesus and His apostles is that such a kingdom life is indeed meant to be incarnated in human history. Through the church. Which cannot continue to be invisible either in Christian discussions about the common good or in our practice of how we go about seeking the good of our neighbors, neighborhoods and cities.

When we Christians are able to live this way in the power of God's Spirit, we don't have to promote ourselves. We don't have to blow our own horn. When you think about what happened in the early church at Antioch, it was the surrounding pagan community that named them "christians". (Acts 11:26). The community had to name the remarkable thing they were seeing from the Antioch outpost. That's the kind of branding we want.

But how? How could such an idealistic vision ever be realized? In most of our churches there is little understanding of the Bible's economic teaching. Salvation is understood primarily as pertaining to an afterlife destination, not human flourishing in the here and now under the influence of the kingdom of God. There really is a huge gulf between clergy and laity when it comes to life beyond Sunday. And there is a

lingering sacred-secular divide that is suspicious that daily life, business, jobs, work and play and social action might somehow be less than “spiritual.” Here’s how . . .

### **Good Works - the Spearpoint of Mission**

The best response to our new missionary situation is to return to our sources. How did Christ and His apostles proceed when faced with a huge pagan Roman Empire? What message did they proclaim (which has been our topic today)? What tasks and priorities did they set for this small fledgling movement and its kingdom outposts from the margins of that empire? What instruction from the inspired Scriptures is there for our quiet and not-so-quiet revolutions? Do we have any clues in the New Testament about living out the Gospel of the Kingdom, seeking the common good of our communities, by word and deed proclaiming that “Jesus is King”? Well yes we do. But.

But I do believe there is a cost, a price to be paid, for us to move from invisible churches to kingdom outposts. It’s not a price to be paid in money. If we could spend ourselves into cultural relevance and influence we churches in the United States surely would have done it by now. Billions of dollars are spent annually by our churches. Most of that spending is well intentioned and accountable. And yet we look ugly to so many, especially to younger generations. No, the price is not to be paid in dollars. It is to be paid in reforming our gospel, our theology and

our discipleship practices to the way of Christ and His apostles. To a Kingdom of God framework.

I believe the little letter of Titus shows us the way, in a short accessible form. I learned this letter in seminary, along with 1&2 Timothy, as one of the Pastoral Epistles. The premise was that Timothy and Titus were functioning as senior pastors of the church in Ephesus (Timothy) and the the church in Crete (Titus). The Pastorals then were to be read as instruction to staff pastors, to clergy, and were thought to be especially rich in church organization and pulpit ministry ideas. But this is not what's going on in 1&2 Timothy and Titus.

Titus, the person, is not a senior pastor. He is a member of the apostle Paul's team. Apparently Paul and his team, including Titus, have successfully planted several (many?) churches in the villages of the island of Crete. While Paul and others have moved on to break new ground, Paul has assigned Titus a task in Crete where he is to remain and complete the apostolic team's work. Paul then writes Titus this letter, as his team leader, giving him in written form capsule instruction on how to go about his assignment - "this is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained in order and appoint elders in every town as I directed you" (v.5).

It's also evident that Paul meant for this letter to Titus to be read and used in the churches of Crete. His extended introduction of himself and his ministry in 1:1-4 was certainly not necessary for Titus to hear, his "true child in a common faith." So, as always, Paul has the health and

strength of the churches on his heart and wants them to see this letter too. In the letter of Titus, we get in a nice compact form, Paul's vision of the well established kingdom outposts that he wants to see planted all across the Roman Empire. These outposts will be the fruit of his apostolic work spreading Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom.

This vision has three major parts, organized neatly by the three chapters of Titus. These are the critical components that our churches need to recover in order to live out the Gospel of the Kingdom with Jesus as our King, effectively seeking the common good of our communities. These components are (1) recovering apostolic function as seen in chapter one, (2) recovering the Didache ( the Greek word for 'teaching' as outlined in chapter two, and (3) recovering kingdom good works as our top priority, as emphasized in chapter three.

SLIDE 18

## **1. Kingdom Leadership: Recovering the Apostolic Function - Chapter One of Titus**

"Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons" (1:12). Wow. This is the culture into which Paul has planted kingdom outposts. Certainly not a christianized culture. Not a culture steeped in Judeo-Christian values and morality. And while not identical to our setting, we are indeed an increasingly un-christianized culture. And a culture like



that demands a missionary mindset, not simply a pastoral mindset.

In light of our discussion today about the Gospel of the Kingdom, let me make a few comments about verses 1-5, in which Paul says:

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, 2 in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began 3 and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior; 4 To Titus, my true child in a common faith: Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

I hope that after our first two sessions we recognize the powerful meaning summarized in these few iconic words of Paul's greeting. Christ, God's elect, promised before the ages, Savior. These are code words, the Hands of the Sistine Chapel. This is a short letter he's writing. Titus his co-worker has heard Paul preach and teach for years. So he doesn't take the time to paint the whole Chapel ceiling, but this introduction is meant to remind Titus and the churches of Crete of his gospel, the Gospel of the Kingdom. That Gospel is meant to form kingdom outposts with kingdom leadership.

Good local pastoral leadership is crucial of course. This is exactly why here in Titus 1 Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders, then gives a concise description of the character and ability of an elder, and then

contrasts good local leadership with disruptive teachers who “must be silenced” (1:11). This is familiar ground and this chapter is one of the go-to passages of Scripture for local elder and pastoral leadership. But the other kind of leader on display in chapter one is often overlooked.

Titus is to appoint elders in every town. And there are multiple kingdom outposts on Crete. They are not fully established in that they lack sound local pastoral leadership and Titus is to put that in place in all these infant churches. He is, in other words, strengthening the nodes of a network across the island of Crete. As a member of Paul’s team, he is exerting a parental authority and influence in these kingdom outposts, and so is able to put in place the right kind of local leadership. His leadership is more global. He is the network glue that links the outposts across the island. This is the work of an apostolic leader.

The apostolic function - whatever we choose to call it - is the pioneering function, the movement function, the out-in-front function. Men and women gifted for this function are the ones who lay the foundations and build the frameworks centered on Jesus and His kingdom gospel. This is a different gifting from the shepherding function - and it’s crucial to recover it in missional contexts. Like ours.

The apostolic concern, expressed by Paul through Titus, is not only for a good local church, though he is certainly anxious for that. But he envisions a network of strong outposts with great local leadership, linked by his ongoing leadership via his teammates (Titus) and his letters (Titus et al).

Now I realize that even using the word “apostolic” creates tension and even problems for some. Fine, let’s find another word then. Because we must recover the function even if we call it something else. Apostolic function is missional in its core DNA. It is the aspect of Kingdom Leadership that is missing in our churches, and because it’s missing we see stagnation instead of movement. It operates from a sense of stewardship of Jesus’ message and His movement. This is Paul’s sense that he has “been entrusted” (1:3). It crosses boundaries whether geographic, cultural, social or racial. It lays foundations and strengthens communities not through command and control, but through parental influence. It is always concerned for the poor (Galatians 2:10).

In every church and network of churches are people gifted for this apostolic function. We need to learn to identify them. We need to equip and release them. We’re generally good at equipping and releasing shepherds and teachers, and you could argue that’s sufficient in a christianized culture. But in a missionary setting you need missionaries, ie men and women from all walks of life who have a gifting and calling for apostolic function. This doesn’t mean they go to a distant country. No, we need these missionaries right here at home. If sound local leadership is the right leg of the body of Christ, then apostolic leadership is the left leg. And the movement of Christ requires both legs in order to advance.

## **2. Kingdom Life Together: Recovering the Didache - Chapter Two of**

## Titus

“Didache” is simply a transliteration of a greek word that means “the teaching.” There’s also an early Christian document by the same name that attempts to summarize the sound practices of the early church in its gatherings and common life. Paul instructs Titus to “teach what accords with sound doctrine” (2:1). Now “sound doctrine” conjures up for us our systematic theologies and our distinctive philosophical-theological commitments. That’s not how Paul uses the concept. In 1 Timothy 1 for instance, he contrasts sound doctrine with physically assaulting parents, murder, heterosexual and homosexual immorality, slave trading, liars and perjurers “and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine”(1 Timothy 1:9-10).

In other words, staying close to the Gospel and its Teaching (the Didache) should result in godly living, in Christlikeness. Sound doctrine’s result is not accurate theological systems, it is beautiful lives and relationships. For sound doctrine is not only reflected in individual behavior, but in the relationships within the church. These relationships are particularly in view here in Titus 2.

Older and younger men, older and younger women, and masters and slaves. And as always, Paul has his apostolic eye not only on the fruitfulness of these relationships within the outpost, but also on how they look to outsiders. Opponents may be put to shame since they’ll have nothing bad to say about how the Christians treat one another (2:8).

The teaching that produces this kind of life together is sound doctrine, ie the Didache.

The slave and master relationship at that time was particularly problematic. With such a huge difference in economic and social standing between the two, conflict seems built in. And it's a public relationship, lived out in the extended household and in the public marketplace. But in the gospel there is no longer slave nor free. In the power of the gospel, this problematic relationship now becomes an opportunity to "adorn the doctrine of God our Savior" (2:10). Under the word translated as "adorn" is the idea of cosmetics. Of putting on makeup. Of beautifying. Of making something beautiful and believable.

This daily life teaching, the Didache, is captured throughout the New Testament in the teaching of Christ and His apostles. The letters and the gospels are not theological white papers - although they are of course rich in theology. The letters and gospels are not collections of devotional nuggets and life verses for our quiet times - though of course the Spirit often uses them to those ends. The New Testament documents are written to congregations and are intended to strengthen them and stabilize these young outposts in the Gospel of the Kingdom, and therefore in their life and mission. We need to reform our way of reading these documents so that we follow the instruction of Christ and His apostles for making disciples - and thus deepen both our theology and our devotion.

This daily life teaching, seen most obviously in the household texts

in the epistles, is particularly important for stabilizing the young churches and advancing the mission. It is a priority for a strong church. Do we need any more warrant than our Master's instruction to a make disciples by "teaching them *to observe* all that I have commanded you" , that is "train them in the teaching"?(Matthew 28:20)

Now, we in the States and perhaps here are flooded with off-the-shelf Bible studies and discipleship materials. Whatever tools we may choose to use, we need to use tools that stabilize our people in the New Testament Didache. The daily life teaching of Christ and His apostles is about personal behavior but it is also about how to conduct yourself in the Christian family, how to deal with sin and conflict, how to understand your vocation and job as advancing the mission of the outpost, how to parent, how to handle money, and a myriad of other sound doctrine issues. The apostles prioritized this kingdom teaching for their kingdom outposts and so should we. (See the second half of almost any apostolic epistle).

Paul is summarizing here the idea that the subjects of God's kingdom will enjoy the blessings of that kingdom when they live in His kingdom way. The quality of the relationships within the kingdom outpost are meant to be one of the two ways we make Jesus and His message beautiful and believable. Now for the second way, which is the spearpoint of kingdom mission.

### **3. Kingdom Assignments: Recovering Good Works - Chapter Three of**

## **Titus**

Paul's instructions to Titus, and through Titus to the Cretan churches and to us, comes to its climax in his insistent exhortation to do good works. Kingdom works. Works that reflect the will and wishes of our King for all the people of the earth. So that all the families of the earth may taste the blessing promised to Abraham and made available by Jesus the King.

He's already foreshadowed this emphasis in chapters one and two. The false teachers of chapter one are "unfit for any good work" (1:16). Because these people are not established in sound doctrine they are literally worthless. "Good works" is used at least ten times in the Pastorals. See for instance 1 Timothy 2 and the instruction to women to beautify themselves, adorn themselves, with good works, an idea similar to the idea here of a church adorning the gospel. Paul uses the phrase six times in Titus alone. "Good works" in the Pastorals refers to "acts done for the good of others." [1]

In chapter two he exhorted Titus as an apostolic team member to himself be a model of doing acts for the good of others (2:7). And now he turns his attention to the kingdom outpost as a whole.

Paul tells us that Jesus Himself, "our great God and Savior", freely sacrificed Himself on the cross precisely in order that we may become "a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works!" (2:14).

Now this is huge, as our current American President likes to say.

There are many reasons Christ went to the cross, and His accomplishment there is surely cosmic and multifaceted. No question. I tried to introduce some of the depth of the cross in the last hour. But in this missionary context, on an island of lazy lying gluttons plagued with worthless religious teachers, Paul emphasizes this much overlooked purpose of Christ's atoning good work: *To set apart for Himself and His mission a movement of people who are zealous about doing acts for the good of others.* Just as Jesus Christ was zealous for his good work on our behalf.

In chapter three the apostle's focus goes clearly to the outsider. To rulers, to authorities, to "all people." (3:1-2) who do not yet proclaim "Jesus is King". He reminds us that we too were once worthless outsiders, but the good work of Jesus saved us, (3:5-7). And now we are to follow our Savior in good works "so as to help cases of urgent need and not be unfruitful" (3:14).

Here's the text from Titus 3:1-8,

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, 2 to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people. 3 For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. 4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because



of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. 8 The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God *may be careful to devote themselves to good works*. These things are excellent and profitable for people.

“Good works” is like “mom and apple pie.” Who could be against them? No one of course. But the apostle is going for more than passive approval. He is going for: zealousness, readiness, and devotion (the words used in verses 2:14, 3:1, 8, 14). These words taken together paint a picture of a community of people whose whole life is given to an intense, even fanatical attention to doing good works in their surrounding community.

These good works will be “profitable for people” (3:8). They will meet urgent, necessary needs (3:14). And without them, the new Cretan Christians and outposts will be living a worthless, fruitless life (3:14). These good works are not just a Saturday spent volunteering at the soup kitchen. They are not an occasional add-on to our internal church programs and busy lives. These good works are to encompass and consume our attention, our lives and families, our jobs and vocations. This not an extra. In a mission setting, in an un-christian culture, this is

Kingdom Assignment number one.

Further, this work belongs to the whole body of Christ. In fact, what we would call clergy are often poorly positioned for this kind of intense focus on the community. The men and women of the outposts are out in the marketplace and the community. They have their finger on the pulse of business, the neighborhoods, the schools, the streets, and the centers of power. The frontline of mission is not the church office. The frontline of kingdom mission is the marketplace. The heroes are the men and women of the kingdom outpost living out their personal Kingdom Assignments from Jesus the King. Because of their allegiance to Him they are zealously devoted to good works. This is the King's will. This is His wish. The apostolic function plants, establishes and puts into place the local shepherding and the network for strong outposts. Then all the members of the outpost are in the ministry of living kingdom lives and initiating needed good works so that even the pagans will notice and "glorify God on the day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:12).

One more point needs to be made here. We know from 2 Corinthians 8 & 9 that Paul's vision extends beyond each outpost's local sphere. As with the collection for the poor in Jerusalem from the Asia Minor outposts, these Cretan outposts can cooperate together. Linked together by the apostolic function, they can join forces for large "urgent needs" beyond the capacity of any one local church. Good works are local, and they are global. Through an apostolic network.

Paul is envisioning a community of people who are so overflowing

with gratefulness for Christ's good work on their behalf, that now washed and renewed by the Holy Spirit (3:5) that same Spirit is empowering them to sacrificial commitment, intentional planning and preparation, taking responsibility for good works in their unbelieving communities. It is not an extra of ministry. It is to be their overriding focus.

Let's notice a couple of things that Paul did not make the climactic point of his letter to Titus. He did not emphasize evangelism. Is Paul against evangelism? Certainly not, but doing personal evangelism is not the mandate he leaves with the Cretan churches. There's not a word of it in this letter. He did not emphasize attractive worship gatherings. Is Paul against worship? Certainly not, and in other letters are rich teachings about worship. But not a word of it here.

Rather, inspired by the Spirit in both his ministry and his writing, Paul knows that in raw missionary contexts like Crete, good works are the spearpoint of mission. Good works will give unbelievers a foretaste of the kingdom. Good works will bring one-mindedness to a kingdom outpost as they plot and plan to bless their communities. Good works will meet urgent needs, giving a watching world a picture of God's salvation. Good works will beautify Jesus and His message. Good works will lead others to give glory to our Father . . . didn't Jesus say something like that in Matthew 5:16? The leading, bleeding edge of mission is good works.

## **Our Experience at Lake Valley**

In the reality of churches too often driven by consumerism or other reduced gospels, can this vision be realized? Can busy over-committed Christians really become zealous for good works? I'd like to tell you a bit of our journey at Lake Valley Community Church, a story of both failure and fruitfulness.

Lake Valley is a modest size church by American standards of about 800-900 people, with about 500 of us gathering on any given Sunday. We started 24 years ago with twelve families in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Hot Springs is partly a typical southern county seat town of about 35,000 people, and we have all the expressions of Bible Belt Christianity you'd find throughout the South. Hot Springs is partly different however. We have a history our chamber of commerce calls "colorful" and which the Bible would peg as sinful. Early lawlessness, later Mafia influence from the New York and Chicago areas, wide open illegal gambling and associated political corruption, and prostitution and the skin business. We're the town you visit to do what you wouldn't do in your hometown. Our most famous resident is former President Bill Clinton.

The founding families of Lake Valley had a strong desire for something different than the usual Bible Belt offerings. There was an early emphasis on strong relationships, clear Bible teaching, authentic worship, and a desire to somehow be a blessing to Hot Springs. In the early years we emphasized a strong network of small groups, and found ourselves learning experientially about the grace and acceptance of Jesus

through our life together. We grew steadily - Hot Springs itself just barely holds its own in terms of population growth.

At a little over fifteen years old we realized we had a problem. We now had several hundred people who were in love with Lake Valley - "best church I've ever been a part of!" - but not so much in love with Jesus and His mission. We had good teaching and warm worship. We used good curriculum in our small groups. We ran equipping seminars. We did the occasional project or workday to bless Hot Springs. But we had lost our pioneering mojo, and we wanted it back.

So we embarked on a staff-designed, top-down attempt to program Lake Valley into a missionary posture. We deconstructed our small groups and redesigned them as missional communities. By fiat. And within less than a year we knew we had made a big mistake. We had hurt people, broken up community, pressurized our congregation and it just wasn't working. It was my single biggest pastoral failure at Lake Valley.

As we apologized to the church and regrouped, we realized we had the two problems identified above: inadequate kingdom theology, and inadequate discipleship processes. We had tried to implement something from the top down that needed to rise from the grassroots up. What I'm about to relate sounds crisper in retrospect, as if we came up with a master plan from the book of Titus and then simply executed. That's not what happened. But the Spirit did lead us to address the same issues that Paul addresses in his letter.

We first realized we needed to recommit to discipleship processes that emphasized the Didache. We had found some good resources over the years that read the New Testament documents as church establishing documents, as Didache. We had used them sporadically. We now began to use them systematically in a highly intentional push to invite selected men and women into discipleship groups that majored on the Didache. These men and women were also invited to turn around and establish others in this sound doctrine. This effort has now leavened our family and our family of families (Lake Valley) with the Didache. Young families that had been raised in church with fragmented do's-and-don'ts will now tell you that they understand how their responsibilities in their families and their work contribute to the advance of Christ's Kingdom.

At the same time, we were studying the missional teaching of Acts and Paul's epistles, and began to see that we had a one-legged body, as I mentioned above. We had a strong group of elders shepherding Lake Valley. Right leg. We had completely overlooked, however, the possibility of the apostolic function at Lake Valley. Our missing left leg. As we saw the apostolic contribution to the spread of the New Testament church, we began to realize we had people here at Lake Valley that were wired that way. What should we do with them? What's their relationship to the elder team and their authority? How does this apostolic stuff work? There were a lot of discussions around these questions over several years. Some of them got heated. We persevered with our Bible's open. Today we recognize the presence of all of the five-

fold functions of Ephesians 4:11 in our body - the apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, shepherding and teaching functions. We also realized we had a smaller group called to apostolic function as a vocation, myself included. Today, the elders of Lake Valley recognize and fund a resident apostolic team. That team engages internationally and domestically in a train-the-trainers approach to building networks and strengthening kingdom outposts.

The third thing the Lord did in parallel with the Didache and the apostolic, was call us to learn a biblical theology of the Gospel of the Kingdom, the message that Jesus came to proclaim (Luke 4:43). As I've explained today, I realized that with all my seminary degrees I understood a lot about substitutionary atonement. I had been learning a lot about the emotional appropriation of grace. But I didn't know what Jesus meant by the gospel of the kingdom.

So we studied. We discussed. And three years ago we directed our entire pulpit ministry to teaching the church what we were learning about the kingdom of God. We're preaching the Bible from Genesis to Revelation on the premise that we need to learn to read our Bible like Jesus read his - as being about Him, and His teaching on the kingdom as the hermeneutical key that unlocks new treasures out of an old storehouse (Matthew 13:51-52). Three years in we have just finished the Old Testament. It has been rich. We've seen the missional emphasis that is simply built in to the Bible when read this way. We've seen how God's people are chosen not to "fly away", but to bless an unbelieving world.

We've preached the laity as the frontline heroes in this story. We've preached the necessity of every Christian understanding their current "kingdom assignment". We've cast the vision of a life of good works that "seeks the shalom of Babylon" (Jeremiah 29). Our current elder discussion is about adopting the following metric for Lake Valley: can everyone at Lake Valley articulate their kingdom assignment from Jesus? What are they doing about it?

Our people are connecting the dots. We have seen initiatives large and small catalyzed in Hot Springs, not by church staff, but by the men and women of Lake Valley. Major efforts around foster care and adoption and widows. Board memberships for local nonprofits. Political involvement from a Biblical perspective. We styled our in-house efforts and programs as For Us, and our efforts for the common good as Beyond Us. Today 40% of our annual budget goes to Beyond Us efforts, and we want to see this grow.

We recently had a church event to highlight Beyond Us efforts started or led by our members. We had nearly 30 booths and tables of substantial common good initiatives that were NOT designed, led, funded or catalyzed by church staff. This in a church of about 500 Sunday attendance.

Our apostolic team has completed a pastor training initiative in Haiti that over the course of five years trained well over 1000 Haitian pastors and church leaders in the Didache. Gilles, Paul and the Two Shores community have been indispensable partners in this effort. We



are now embarked on a similar effort to train Haitian business leaders in Biblical wisdom, to create jobs and indigenous community action in that impoverished nation.

Closer to home we have helped start two statewide efforts to address Arkansas' growing prison populations and the problem of recidivism. The most recent of these efforts was mandated by the Governor of Arkansas. In Hot Springs, doors are opening into local businesses led by kingdom-minded owners to work together for poverty alleviation in Garland County.

I want to be careful to not misrepresent what's happening at Lake Valley. It writes neater than it lives. The reality is messy and sometimes discouraging. But we are so encouraged by the fruitfulness that has come from a commitment to a fully functioning church, a disciplined church body, and a Kingdom of God gospel and theology.

Lake Valley Community Church is not a megachurch. We are not a famous church. But neither are we invisible in Hot Springs, Garland County, or the state of Arkansas. To the glory of God. For the spread of Jesus' kingdom. That He and His Gospel of the Kingdom may once again be beautiful and believable in the South.

### **Now It's Your Turn**

I don't have a plug-and-play program for you or your church. There's

not even a basket of best ministry practices here for the clergy. What I do commend to you is the clear teaching of Christ and His apostles about how to proceed in our new, changed North American context. Our new missionary context. Each of us has our unique setting. We each have our distinctive theological and perhaps denominational commitments. It doesn't matter to me if we use words like kingdom, apostolic, good works, or Didache. I think what matters is whether you're committed to the way of Christ and His apostles, as delivered to us by the Spirit in our Bibles. We must recover the Gospel of the Kingdom. We must recover the vision of churches as Kingdom Outposts, and its implications for Kingdom Leadership, Kingdom Life Together, and our Kingdom Assignments.

We're still on the journey of recovering these things at Lake Valley. We'd love to travel with others on the same journey. May our life together adorn the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May He and His Gospel of the Kingdom be beautiful and believable because of us.

#### QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS OR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

1. How do you or your church understand and implement the apostolic function - whatever you may call it?

2. How are you or your church establishing your people in the Didache of the New Testament documents?
  
3. How much of your church's focus, energy and money goes into a good works kingdom focus for outsiders, as opposed to the focus, energy and money expended on worship services, staff, and internal programs for members?
  
4. In what ways does a more robust understanding of Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom lead to seeing your church as a kingdom outpost? Can you connect those dots?
  
5. What is your current Kingdom Assignment from King Jesus? What are you doing about it?