




Missional Journal

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Getting Off the Bus

The focus of Jesus' ministry was the "good news of the kingdom" (Matt. 4:23; 9:35). The announcement of the kingdom was rooted in the Old Testament promises that in the latter days Yahweh would return to his exiled people to grant forgiveness, bring deliverance to the needy and oppressed, and pour out his Spirit. This would be accomplished in the days of the Messiah, the descendant of David, who would bring judgment on the wicked, vindication to the poor, and shalom to the earth.

The good news was that God's kingdom was "at hand." The near-presence of the kingdom was demonstrated in the powerful preaching, healing, and deliverance ministry of the Lord. If Jesus drove out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God had finally arrived (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20). Its full manifestation still awaits the return of the Son of Man, but in the meanwhile the kingdom is like yeast working, or mustard plants growing, or a net gathering fish to the shore. Sin will not have the last word. Yahweh will reclaim and restore what is his. The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14). Jesus taught his disciples to seek the kingdom of God as their highest priority (Matt. 6:33), to pray for its increased manifestation on earth (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2), and to implement its values individually and corporately.

Church without Kingdom

The problem is that for many Western Christians, particularly conservative Protestants, this kingdom focus has not been integrated into our understanding of the church. There are various reasons for this failure. In the 16th and 17th centuries the magisterial Reformers, both Lutheran and Calvinist, were primarily concerned with the theology of Paul and the doctrine of justification in particular. They tended to subordinate the teaching of Jesus to a Reformation reading of Paul and to equate

the kingdom with the church, muting or ignoring distinctive elements of the teaching of Jesus as a result. The Anabaptists gave greater attention to the Gospels and the teaching of Jesus, but until the last half-century their voice and influence was largely marginalized.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Dispensationalism further deemphasized the theology of the kingdom. In classical dispensational teaching the kingdom belongs to Israel; God has a distinct plan for the Jews which will fulfill the OT promises made to Abraham and his family. This kingdom plan was offered to Israel through the ministry of Jesus, but because of Jewish unbelief has temporarily been put aside. God is now working from Plan B, which is the age of the Church--a plan hidden in the OT, but now made known by the Spirit. Once the Church age is complete, God will again take up his kingdom agenda with Israel.

Dispensationalists interpreted the flow of history pessimistically. The world was a mess and would only get worse as the end approached. Fortunately, the true believers would be rescued ("raptured") shortly before the eschatological judgments began, and at this time God would take up again his specific plans for Israel.

The spread of Dispensationalism in America coincided with the early 20th century controversy between Protestant Liberalism and Fundamentalism. Liberalism pursued a "social gospel" ostensibly based on the simple moral teachings of Jesus and liberated from the rigid constraints of later orthodoxy. Fundamentalists, sensing that Christianity as a whole was at risk, pushed back with a powerful focus on the authority of the Bible, the thoroughly supernatural character of the gospel, and the necessity of personal faith in Jesus.

The outcome of these influences[1] was that many of us grew up in churches that paid scant attention to the social implications of Jesus' teaching and even felt justified in doing so. Did not Jesus teach us to be separate from the world?

This outlook synchronized easily with a broader cultural pattern known as privatization, which evangelical theologian Os Guinness defines as "the process by which modernization produces a cleavage between the public and the private spheres of life and focuses the private sphere as the special arena for the expansion of individual freedom and fulfillment." [2] In this cleavage the church in the West confined itself largely to the private sector as the appropriate sphere for the exercise of faith. As a result it

became "socially irrelevant, even if privately engaging." [3]

So we might say that many churches in America were like people sitting on a bus waiting to leave town. When Jesus returned, the bus would leave and all hell would (literally) break loose. In the healthier churches there was genuine concern for the people in the town who would be left behind. Various excursions were made into the town to encourage others to get on the bus.

But notice that in this scenario there was relatively little concern for the town itself. Issues like racism, pollution, conservation, or economic injustice were not worth consideration. Why worry about what was bound to get worse anyway? This ecclesiology was self-parodied in the bumper sticker that some Christians displayed: "In case of rapture, this car will be un-manned."

Seeking a Better Way

The healthy development taking place right now in many churches is that people are deciding to get off the bus. The prayer for God's kingdom to come on earth compels us to view our communities in a different way. We begin to ask the question: what would it look like in our neighborhood if the kingdom came in greater power today? And the obvious follow-up question is: what role do we have as kingdom-agents in supplying an answer to the prayer? It is this logic that leads NT scholar Scot McKnight to say that one of the fundamental missional questions is, "how can we help?"

Another way to formulate the issue is to say that the gospel has two foci: the passive and the active. In the former we receive and in the latter we give. This is the structure embedded in what Paul calls "the gospel preached beforehand to Abraham": "I will bless you . . . and you will be a blessing" (Gal. 3:8; Gen. 12:2). The pattern marks every aspect of the gospel: we are blessed to be a blessing, we are loved so that we may be lovers, we are forgiven that we might forgive, we have been reconciled so that we may be peace-makers, etc. But in many of our churches we have focused on the first element and ignored the second--we have been content to receive without giving.

The potential danger with any movement of correction is that it will result in *over*-correction. We should acknowledge this possibility without allowing it to paralyze appropriate action. It is in fact *over*-correction that has brought us to a place of privatized and self-centered expressions of the gospel. In this year when delegates from around the world will gather in Cape Town, South Africa for the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization,

the words of the original Lausanne Covenant are still a helpful pointer to a more holistic practice of the gospel:

When people receive Christ they are born again into his kingdom and must seek not only to exhibit but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world. The salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead.[4]

Right. It's time to get off the bus.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dave", with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

[1]There were historical factors beyond those I have mentioned. See, for example, David Moberg, *The Great Reversal: Evangelism versus Social Concern* (J.B. Lippincott, 1972), pp. 28-43.

[2]Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File* (IVP, 1983), p. 74. Guinness's chapter "The Private-Zoo Factor" (pp. 71-89) is a helpful discussion of the problems raised for the church by the public/private dichotomy.

[3]Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends* (Doubleday, 1973), p. 449. Quoted in Guinness, p. 79.

[4]<http://www.lausanne.org/covenant>. See paragraph 5.