

Christ and the Kingdom

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*You lead people to become disciples of Jesus by ravishing them with a vision of life in the kingdom of the heavens in the fellowship of Jesus. And you do this by proclaiming, manifesting, and teaching the kingdom to them in the manner learned from Jesus himself. You thereby change the belief system that governs their lives.*¹

- Dallas Willard

In the epic movie *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, the kingdom of Rohan has shriveled from its glory days. Watching the forces of darkness advance against his once proud city, King Théoden laments, "The days have gone down in the West behind the hills into shadow. How did it come to this?"² This question applies to the West today. In "A Pastoral Letter on Mission," a group of pastors of the Reformed Episcopal Church give an answer to this question: "It came to this because the Great Commission of Jesus Christ has been all but neutralized by a return of paganism to North America and Europe."³ My aim is to "deneutralize"- that is, to restore, revalidate, and recharge - the Great Commission. My desire is to put the great back in the church's mission.

As we begin our study of the Great Commission, we must first look at the person of Jesus Christ, whose *great claim* of authority is foundational to the assignment he has for his people.

Christus Victor

The Great Commission has two settings, the earthly and the cosmic. The earthly setting overlooked the Sea of Galilee on a physical mountain. After the resurrection, Jesus instructed the disciples to meet him in the north of Israel: "Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted" (Matt. 28:16-17). They had encountered the resurrected Jesus in various ways near Jerusalem, yet they did not all react alike. Some prostrated themselves before him as an act of reverence. Others wavered, unsure of what to think or how to respond.

Who can blame them? They had left everything to follow Jesus, expecting him to ride victoriously into Jerusalem as the Messiah who would overthrow the Roman army and set up a political kingdom. Instead, after three years of building anticipation, the inconceivable unfolded before their eyes: Jesus was arrested, tried, and crucified! Their dreams had been shattered; their lives seemed over.

¹ *Epigraph*: Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 305.

² *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, directed by Peter Jackson (Burbank, Calif: New Line Cinema, 2002), DVD.

³ Reformed Episcopal Church, "A Pastoral Letter on Mission," (Introduction)
http://www.recus.org/mission_letter.html

But then there was a miraculous event. Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples. He instructed his disciples to meet him in Galilee.⁴ In obedience and, no doubt, in wonder, they went to Galilee. There, in the beautiful Galilean hills, Christ made his profound announcement - his great claim: "Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'" (Matt. 28:18). Then he gave his disciples the task that we call the Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20).

The cosmic setting of the Great Commission is in the heavens, framed by a battle between God and Satan, a conflict over the old order of death and the new order of life. Whoever won this epic battle would rule the world and determine the outcome of history.

The first of two skirmishes took place in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus had to overcome the *fear of death*.⁵ He prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).⁶ Facing the cross, Jesus experienced a fierce struggle of the inner man. Three times he prayed, asking the Father to let the cup pass. But he wanted the Father's will more than he wanted the cup's removal.⁷ Thus the Father's will became the Son's will, and the means to redemption for man was secured. Christ portrays his work as binding Satan,⁸ and Paul describes the nature of the victory of the cross: "Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15).

The second skirmish was in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea; it was the battle to overcome *death itself*.⁹ Until Christ came, death had always won. Even in the isolated cases of people being raised from the grave, death won in the end. Lazarus, for example, died a second time. But death could not hold Christ, who was irreversibly raised from the dead.¹⁰ He conquered death, overcame the forces of evil, and began the process of reconciling all things to himself,¹¹ introducing a new era in human history. Now we need no longer live in the fear of death.¹² The creation order is being restored; the kingdom of God is coming.

Every war has its turning-point battle, even if it is not obvious until later. The turning point in the cosmic spiritual war was the cross. On the cross, Christ won. He is *Christus Victor*. Satan is the defeated enemy. He has been dethroned; his counterfeit reign and order are drawing to an end.

⁴ Matt. 28:16.

⁵ That is not to say that Jesus was afraid to die but that his victory over death included victory over the fear of death. He successfully faced down and overcame that fear as he overcame every temptation.

⁶ John Stott suggests that the cup Jesus dreaded "symbolized...the spiritual agony of bearing the sins of the world-in other words, of enduring the divine judgment that those sins deserved" (John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006], 78).

⁷ Matt. 26:36-46.

⁸ Matt. 12:22-29.

⁹ Matt. 28:5-6.

¹⁰ Acts 2:24.

¹¹ Col. 1:20.

¹² Heb.2:14-15.

Christ will now restore the creation order as he restores life over death. In the cosmic conflict, mop-up operations continue, but the outcome is certain.

The late balladeer for Christ, Keith Green, captured Christ's conquest in his song "The Victor":¹³

Swallowed into earth's dark womb
Death has triumphed
That's what they say
But try to hold Him in the tomb
The Son of Life
Rose on the third day...

It is finished
He has done it
Life conquered death
Jesus Christ
Has won it...

Just listen to those demons screaming
See Him bruise the serpent's head
The prisoners of Hell
He's redeeming (Oh!)
All the power of death is dead

English writer, journalist, and culture critic G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) captured the wonder of the new era that dawned with the resurrection: "On the third day the friends of Christ coming at daybreak to the place found the grave empty and the stone rolled away. In varying ways they realized the new wonder; but even they hardly realized that the world had died in the night. What they were looking at was the first day of a new creation, with a new heaven and a new earth; and in a semblance of the gardener God walked again in the garden, in the cool not of the evening but the dawn."¹⁴

In the new era that has dawned with his resurrection, Christ is establishing his kingdom on earth.¹⁵ Christus Victor calls us to live in the framework of his ordinances and extend his rule from heaven to earth.

Too often the church functions as if Satan were the victor and Christ the vanquished. We give too much credit to the demonic, living defensively in our world and communities. Although the Bible acknowledges that Satan is the "prince of this world" (John 12:31) "who leads the whole world astray" (Rev. 12:9), Satan's power extends only to those areas where people willfully live in darkness and do evil. First John 3:8 states, "The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning." But the verse continues, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." The Bible is clear that Satan has been

¹³ Keith Green, "The Victor," *No Compromise*, Sparrow Records, 1978. To see a video of this powerful song, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wil0PBylyW0>.

¹⁴ G. K. Chesterton, quoted in John Warwick Montgomery, "The Un-Apologist," *Christian History* 21, no. 3, 39.

¹⁵ Isa. 9:7; Luke 1:32-33; Matt. 13:31-33.

ultimately defeated by Christ's death and resurrection. The language that Paul uses is unambiguous: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15). In this passage we see the language of war, where one side wins and one side loses a critical battle. Christ's death on the cross was the turning point of the great spiritual war between God and Satan. Satan is a defeated enemy; he is in retreat, and his final judgment is certain.¹⁶ The unconquerable Christ calls us to follow him to storm the very gates of hell and assures us they will not prevail against us.¹⁷ Of all people on earth, Christians should be most optimistic, because Christ has won the decisive battle of the great cosmic conflict, and we know the end of history!

The Rule of God on Earth

As I have had the privilege of traveling around the world, I have asked pastors and church leaders, "Of what is Jesus king today?" The almost uniform answer is, "He is king of heaven today and will be king of earth when he comes back!" But what does the Bible say?

Paul delineates Christ's supremacy over all things now, not merely over the heavenly realm. Notice how many times Paul says "all creation," "all things," and "everything":

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over *all creation*. For in him *all things* were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; *all things* have been created through him and for him. He is before *all things*, and in him *all things* hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in *everything* he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col. 1:15-20)

Jesus confirms his earthly rule in his dialogue with the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate:

Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

"Is that your own idea;" Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

"Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"

Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is *from* another place."

"You are a king, then!" said Pilate.

¹⁶ Rev. 20:10.

¹⁷ Matt. 16:18.

Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth." (John 18:33-37)

N. T. Wright, Bible scholar and former bishop of Durham, England, helps us understand the nuance of Christ's words concerning his kingdom: "It's quite clear in the text that Jesus' kingdom doesn't start with this world. It isn't a worldly kingdom, but it is *for* this world. It's from somewhere else, but it's for this world.¹⁸ Christ's kingdom is not of this world; it is not founded on the pagan worldviews or values of humanism or animism.¹⁹ His kingdom is from heaven, where it is already established comprehensively and perfectly. When Christ came incarnate, he began to establish his kingdom on earth.

We see this reflected in the prayer the Lord taught his disciples to pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9-10). Too often we unthinkingly pray the Lord's Prayer, not recognizing God's intentions. He wants his kingdom to come and his will to be done *on earth* as it is in heaven.

God has a big agenda for the world. It includes, among other things, the stewarding of creation, the blessing of all nations, the discipling of nations, and the reconciliation of all things to Christ.²⁰ He also intends to make one kingdom out of many nations - *E pluribus unum* (out of many, one).²¹

Every kingdom, including the kingdom of God, has five essentials:

A king who rules: Jesus is the King

The king's subjects. Today, all who put their trust in Christ are his subjects. At the end of time, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.²²

The king's realm: heaven and earth

Laws and ordinances that comprise the order of the kingdom. These are the laws of creation, which we will look at later.²³

The king's embassy with its envoys who represent the kingdom. The church is the embassy, and Christians are the king's envoys or ambassadors.

How does a church serve as God's embassy? One example comes from Ayacucho, Peru, during the period of the Maoist terrorist movement, the Shining Path, in the 1990s. Pastor Samuel Alcarraz Cur recalls that "when the guerillas were really active in Peru, they were preaching death but my church was preaching life. We gained the reputation as a church that loved the

¹⁸ N. T. Wright, interview by Tim Stafford, "Mere Mission," *Christianity Today*, January 5, 2007, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/january/22.38.html?start=4>; emphasis added.

¹⁹ Rom. 1:22-23.

²⁰ Gen. 1:26-27; Gen. 12:2-3; Matt. 28:18-20; Col. 1:20.

²¹ Rev. 5:9-10.

²² Phil. 2:9-11.

²³ All rulers create laws in order to rule. Jesus is the king and wants nations to be disciplined by teaching them to obey all he has commanded. There is order in the kingdom of God, but we live in a fallen world where there is *disorder* because all people do not obey God's order. When people disobey God's order, disorder in life and nations is the result. This is corrected by a restoration of the Creator's order in our nations.

people; the guerillas were calling to kill and be killed. And so our church grew greatly because we offered health, security, nutrition, clothing, love and peace, the practical kingdom of God.²⁴

God's kingdom order builds free and prosperous societies. Satan's counterfeit order brings bondage and poverty.²⁵

Concurrently Growing Kingdoms

Many Christians believe that things on earth will get worse and worse, and when they get bad enough, Jesus will come back. Several years ago, the Bolivia country director of Food for the Hungry told me that his staff, mostly evangelical and charismatic Christians, believed that because things were getting worse, Christ's return must be imminent. The irony was that they worked for a development organization to bring improvement and reduce poverty in Bolivian communities. They lived in tension: would their community development work delay Christ's return?

The kingdom of darkness is growing.²⁶ If one thinks sequentially (as in the great Hindu cycles of life: birth-life-death-rebirth), things, indeed appear desperate. But if one thinks concurrently, we see a more hopeful future and abundant reason to work against moral, natural, and institutional evil.

The Bible speaks of concurrently growing kingdoms: the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. We see this in the words of Jesus: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.... Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: 'First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn'" (Matt. 13:24-26, 30).

We also see this in the images of the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap²⁷ and in the great shaking to separate the permanent from the transient.²⁸ The city God has built will stand; what Satan has built will be destroyed. St. Augustine, reflecting on the sack of Rome in AD 410, said, "All earthly cities are vulnerable. Men build them and men destroy them. At the same time there is the City of God which men did not build and cannot destroy and which is everlasting."²⁹

Christ's kingdom is not static; it is expanding. It is overwhelming,³⁰ progressing,³¹ and growing.³² The old order is passing away; the new order is coming.³³ Jesus announces, "I am

²⁴ As told by Pastor Curi to Mandie Miller in Puerto Rico, September 15, 2008.

²⁵ For more on this, see Vision Conference Sessions: *The ABC's of Culture: The Web of Lies*, <http://www.disciplenations.org/media/09-ABCs-of-Culture-notebook-9.08.doc>.

²⁶ Matt. 24:6-8; Rev. 6:1-8.

²⁷ Mal. 3:2-4; 1 Cor.3:12-13.

²⁸ Dan. 7:14-27; Heb. 12:26-29.

²⁹ St. Augustine, quoted in Charles Colson and Ellen Vaughn, *Being the Body* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2003), 3.

³⁰ Dan. 2:35,44-45; 7:27.

³¹ Isa. 9:6-7; Matt. 16:18; 28:20b; 1 Cor. 15:25-27; Rev. 11:15.

making everything new!" (Rev. 21:5). He is transforming culture from within, and he calls us to play a part in the spread of his kingdom on earth.

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³² Matt. 13:31-33.

³³ Isa. 25:8; 1 Cor. 7:31.