

God's Kingdom Advances from the Inside-Out

By Scott D. Allen

For many people St. Patrick is a mythical figure like Santa Claus. In Ireland and other countries, Saint Patrick's Day celebrates the beginning of spring, and people wear green clothes as part of the tradition. But there was a real St. Patrick, whose deep faith in God and obedience to his calling changed Ireland forever.

Patrick was born around 390 A.D. to a middle-class Christian family in Roman Britain. When he was a teenager, marauding Irish raiders attacked his home. Patrick was captured, taken to Ireland, and sold to an Irish landowner as a slave. During his long, lonely existence in Ireland, he began to pray. He wrote in his *Confessions*, "I would pray constantly during the daylight hours" and "the love of God...surrounded me more and more."¹ Patrick's life was transformed through faith in Christ. He eventually escaped, returned to Britain, became a priest, and later a bishop. Then thirty years after Patrick fled Ireland, he sensed God calling him to return as a missionary.

The Irish of the fifth century were known throughout Europe as unusually violent and barbaric people. They frequently practiced human sacrifice. By returning to Ireland, Patrick understood the danger he faced. He wrote, "I am ready to be murdered, betrayed, enslaved—whatever may come my way. But I am not afraid of any of these things because of the promises of heaven; for I have put myself in the hands of God Almighty."²

Thomas Cahill describes Patrick's missionary life in his book, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. He writes, "Patrick devoted 30 years of his life to these warrior children, that they might 'seize the everlasting kingdom' with all the energy and intensity they had devoted to enslaving each other and seizing one another's kingdoms."³ His love for the Irish "shines through his writings...He [worried] constantly for his people, not just for their spiritual but for their physical welfare."⁴

Patrick's missionary work succeeded beyond his dreams. Countless Irish people gave their lives to Christ because of his witness. As a result Irish society was transformed. Cahill explains:

Within his lifetime or soon after his death, the Irish slave trade came to a halt, and other forms of violence, such as murder and intertribal warfare, decreased. His disciples lived faithful lives for Christ, reminding the Irish that "the virtues of lifelong faithfulness, courage, and generosity were actually attainable by ordinary human beings and that the sword was not the only instrument for structuring a society."⁵

¹ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1995), p. 102.

² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

In his last years of life, Patrick observed a transformed Ireland—changed because of his obedience to God’s call, his sacrificial love for the Irish people, and the supernatural power of God’s Word. Through the obedience of a single person God is able, within a relatively short period of time, to dramatically advance his Kingdom and transform an entire culture. Even in a culture as bloodthirsty and war-like as fifth-century Ireland.

A Helpful Analogy

Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God as something that was coming (Mt 6:9–10) or advancing. In Matthew 11:12 he told his disciples, “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.” Jesus speaks of the Kingdom as something moving and progressing, like an advancing army capturing new territory and pushing back the enemy.

The Old Testament story of the conquest of Canaan, recorded in the book of Joshua, provides an analogy for how God’s Kingdom advances today. In this story God’s chosen people are the children of Israel. God is their ultimate ruler, and Joshua serves as the commanding general (Dr 31:14, 23). Today God’s chosen people comprise the worldwide body of Christ, the church (1 Pt 2:9). As with Israel, the church exists under God’s authority, but Jesus commands the troops (Rv 19:11–16).

While the weapons and methods are very different, the Old Testament story of the conquest of Canaan, recorded in the book of Joshua, provides an analogy for the advancement of God’s kingdom today. In this story God’s chosen people are the children of Israel. God is their ultimate ruler, and Joshua serves as the commanding general (Deut. 31:14, 23). Today, God’s chosen people comprise the worldwide body of Christ, the church (1 Pet. 2:9). As with Israel, the church exists under God’s authority, but Jesus commands the troops (Rev. 19:11-16).

In the Old Testament, the object of conquest was the Promised Land of Canaan. Today, the Promised Land is the entire world! The church has been enlisted to engage in a world-transforming campaign, with its final goal the establishment of God’s Kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10). In the Old Testament story, God assured his chosen people of their ultimate victory. He promised Abraham, the forefather of the nation of Israel, that someday his descendants would inherit Canaan (Gen 15). God restated this promise to Joshua several generations later, on the eve of the invasion (Josh 1:1–5).

While God assured Joshua and his people that ultimate victory was theirs, they still had to assert themselves. They were to pick up their weapons, and in the power and might supplied by God, occupy the land by force. They had to be active and strategic. They had to work for the victory. Today God has promised Jesus, our commanding general, the ultimate victory (Ps 2:6–9). However, just like the children of Israel, the church must actively engage in advancing the Kingdom of God. We cannot sit idly by and wait for God to fulfill his promise. We must be active and strategic, working in God’s strength. We must join in the battle, working in humility and service, faithfully following the example set by Jesus himself.

The Weapons of Advancement

During Canaan's conquest, warriors fought with the sword, spear, and battering ram, but our weapons exist in the spiritual rather than the physical realm. The apostle Paul writes, "We fight with weapons that are different from those the world uses. Our weapons have power from God that can destroy the enemy's [Satan's] strong places" (2 Cor 10:4, NCV).

Throughout church history, people have tried extending the Kingdom entirely through human efforts, wisdom, and methods. In some cases they have instigated social action. Though Christians must be engaged in the social arenas, none of these activities alone will advance God's Kingdom. Others have advocated violent revolution, but there is no place for physical violence in advancing God's Kingdom. Christ disarmed the church at Gethsemane (Mt 26:52). When Jesus says, "I came not to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt 10:34), he was warning his disciples that the world would not quickly or easily accept their message, not recommending bloodshed.

Today we advance the Kingdom with the figurative sword, the Word of God (Eph 6:17). The Word of God is a far more powerful weapon than the literal sword. Only it holds God's power to transform human hearts. God's Word is "living and active and sharper than any two edged sword" (Heb 4:12). While God's Word tells us that civil authorities may "bear the sword" (Rom 13:1-5), it is not so for the church in its efforts to advance the Kingdom.

Instead the church advances God's Kingdom with spiritual armor and weapons (Eph 6:10-18). Our ultimate foe is Satan, not "flesh and blood" (Eph 6:12). We follow our conquering Commander into battle and fight in his strength, not our own (Rev 19:11-16; 2 Cor. 12:9-10). We move forward with prayerful humility, sacrificing all, including our lives, if necessary. The Kingdom of God advances "not by might nor by power, but by [God's] Spirit" (Zech 4:6). Humanity wants to conquer the world with force, violence, and the sword. The Kingdom's army follows the King into battle and advances on its knees through prayer and faithful action.

Advancing from the Inside Out

The world's kingdoms often expand their territories through warfare and domination. They seek to transform the world through bloody revolutions and the imposition of new rulers, laws, and structures. In contrast, the Kingdom of God advances from the inside out. In God's Kingdom, global transformation begins inwardly, through the spiritual regeneration of individuals. In John 3:3 Jesus claims, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." Individuals need to be rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the Kingdom of God (Col 1:13).

As Pastor Grover Gunn explains, "culture as a series of concentric circles, with the bull's eye being the individual heart and the surrounding circles representing, in order, the family, the church, and the world."⁶ Each of these groups can advance the Kingdom of God if they have been changed from the inside out.

⁶ Grover Gunn, "Making Waves." *Tabletalk* from Ligonier Ministries and R.C. Sproul, Jan. 2001, p. 12.

Transforming the Individual

“God’s law must be written on the individual’s heart, then later on the stone tablets of the institutions of society,” says Pastor Gunn.⁷ In the conquest of Canaan, the first battle commenced at the heavily fortified city of Jericho. The New Testament counterpart is the battle for a human heart. Jesus Christ “invades the heart and [destroys] the sin nature, that inner inclination to do wrong.”⁸ Until this critical battle is won, there is no real advancement.

Jericho had high and impenetrable walls; so does the human heart. It takes God’s direct, supernatural intervention to destroy these inner walls and subdue the heart. An attempt to extend the Kingdom of God without dealing with sinful hearts will fail. These efforts will turn into empty utopian dreams. The church must keep its zeal to share the gospel and offer eternal life through Christ’s salvation to people everywhere. “Our primary means of [transforming] the world is through proclaiming the Gospel message of Jesus in word and deed. . . . We today must never question the effectiveness of the Gospel message as the cutting edge of positive social change.”⁹

Once individuals are regenerated through the Holy Spirit’s power, they are to enroll in God’s “Bible school.”¹⁰ They repent (which literally means to have their mind-set transformed) from the “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Col 2:8). They are to give their whole lives in service to Christ and his kingdom. They must no longer be conformed “to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of [the] mind” (Rom. 12:2).

While the advancement of God’s Kingdom begins with individual regeneration, it certainly doesn’t end there! Many who are passionate about evangelism, missions, and church planting have forgotten this important truth. The Kingdom of God is more than saving souls for heaven and planting churches. “All the earth rightfully belongs to Jesus and owes him submission and allegiance.”¹¹ God’s Kingdom is to impact not only all of life but all of society as well.

Beginning with Family

The family is the most basic social unit of any society. Likewise, it should be the first social unit impacted by God’s Kingdom. Once people experience heart and mind transformation, their family can live out the right-side-up value system of God’s Kingdom.

The family can function as the “microcosmic Kingdom of God.”¹² The roles of husband, wife, child, parent, and grandparent can be brought into line with God’s revealed intentions. The father, as head of the family, declares along with Joshua, “But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Josh 24:15).

⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 13.

¹² Ibid., p. 12.

Mobilizing the Church

The church is God's chosen community, selected to advance his Kingdom on earth. "The task of the church is to make the invisible kingdom visible through faithful Christian living and witness-bearing. The gospel of Christ is the gospel of the kingdom [and the church must not only share the gospel, but] make its message credible by manifesting the reality of the kingdom life."¹³

The church is the place where God's Kingdom materializes on earth in a particular and concentrated way. The church is the embassy of God's Kingdom and followers of Christ are to be Kingdom "ambassadors" (2 Cor. 5:20). The church is responsible for proclaiming the Gospel and training new believers. It is also responsible to "prepare God's people for works of service" (Eph 4:12) as they work towards social and cultural transformation.

Influencing the World

Transformed individuals and families advance God's kingdom as the church takes the Word of God into all nations and into all spheres of society. As believers, our "specific engagement with the world will be determined to a large degree by our calling in life or vocation. Every Christian must examine himself as to what gifts God has given him, consider what opportunities God is giving him to develop these gifts, and exercise them."¹⁴ Most Christians will be called to advance the Kingdom of God through small arenas where they exercise some degree of influence. Always they can work to the best of their abilities and to the glory of God.

According to Pastor Gunn, different vocational areas offer unique opportunities to advance God's Kingdom. Christians engaged in politics and legislation can acknowledge God as the supreme authority and his laws as the highest laws. Christian businessmen and businesswomen can work with honesty and integrity. Christian doctors can respect the sanctity of human life. Christian artists can reflect God's nature and the glory and beauty of his creation through their creativity. Christians engaged in science can seek to understand the design and purpose expressed in God's created order and develop innovations to help fight hunger and disease.

Christians should be thoughtful citizens, looking for opportunities to provide leadership in the community and the workplace. Some Christians will bring about institutional reform within their vocations—reform that is consistent with the biblical truth. Others will respond to God's calling to confront institutionalized evil within their cultures. In all cases Christians' activities must be linked to the message and power of the gospel, and to advancing the Kingdom from the inside out.¹⁵

Now, but Not Yet

As we seek to advance God's Kingdom on earth, we can keep an important truth in mind. The Kingdom will not come in its fullness until the King returns. As theologian J. I. Packer describes

¹³ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. 1993).

¹⁴ Gunn, *Making Waves*, p. 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

it, “The Kingdom is present in its beginnings though future in its fullness; in one sense it is here already, but in the richest sense it is still to come (Luke 11:20; 16:16; 22:16).”¹⁶

As servants of the King, we use our gifts, talents, and resources to advance the Kingdom until Christ returns. We are not to sit idle and wait for him to return with his Kingdom (Lk 19:11–13). God promised our Commander success in his battle for Kingdom conquest. We must follow him into battle.

This reading is adapted from chapter seven (Advancing God’s Kingdom) of *God’s Unshakable Kingdom*, pp. 95-104

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Published by YWAM Publishing
a ministry of Youth With A Mission
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¹⁶ Packer, *Concise Theology*.