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In 1896, George Stratton, a professor at the University of California, was considering the different theories in circulation at the time about how our brains process the things we see with our eyes. In order to test his ideas, Professor Stratton became his own lab rat. He created a device he could wear over his eyes that caused him to see everything upside-down. When he was awake, he wore this contraption and forced himself to function in a newly upside-down world. Whenever he went to sleep and took off the goggles, he tied a dark blindfold over his face so that he would never see the world properly upright. For his longest experiment, he saw only an upside-down world for eight solid days. Throughout his experiments, Professor Stratton kept a detailed record of his adjustment to this new experience of
visual (mis)perception. He carefully described two developments unfolding simultaneously.

Although his reversed visual perspective was initially very disorienting, he slowly adjusted to it, so that by the end of his experiments he had become thoroughly at home—at least functionally—in his new, upside-down world. His vision never corrected itself; that is, his brain never compensated by “righting” his view of the world while he wore the goggles. Everything continued to look upside-down to the professor, but he did eventually get used to it. He described how, over time, he was able to go for walks, write letters with pen and paper, reach out and grab distant objects, drink a cup of coffee, and perform any number of routine activities as if upside-down were the only way he had ever seen the world. Other scientists have reproduced Stratton’s experiment more recently and have reported similar results, with test subjects wearing their upside-down goggles as they went downhill skiing and rode a bicycle through busy intersections.2

The second development is especially interesting for our current purposes. Professor Stratton also detailed a parallel process that may best be described as a mental contest developing within his own mind. While his eyes always saw the world upside-down through his goggles, his memory stood ready as a mental guardian, resisting the change by continuing to insist that the visual image was false. His mind or memory—perhaps we could say his “mind’s eye”—maintained and persistently reasserted the mental images of what it knew he should be seeing, that is, everything right-side up.
These right-side up images drawn from memory were in constant conflict with the upside-down visual images that his mind now had to register because they were the images his eyes actually perceived. Stratton’s descriptions of this mental contest sound like a perceptual tug-of-war coursing back and forth in his imagination as his mental processing tried to figure out what to do with the (seemingly) abnormal visual stimuli sent to his brain. The professor eventually describes a mental resting place that depended on whether his eyes were open or closed. As he continued to look through the goggles, Stratton became increasingly proficient at functioning in an upside-down world; his mind finally acquiesced and stopped contesting what his eyes saw. But whenever he took off the goggles and replaced them with the blindfold, so that the reversed visual images disappeared, his mind quickly relapsed into recalling the world right-side up. Now, with eyes closed, all imaginary activity occurred in the right-side-up world safely preserved within his mind. As he drifted off to sleep, Professor Stratton was, once again, a right-side-up man living in a right-side-up world.

Professor Stratton’s description of the internal perceptual tug-of-war sparked by his goggles experiment is helpful, I believe, in illustrating the sense of ethical disorientation that is often experienced by Jesus’s disciples, ancient and modern, as they begin to think through the practical, real-life implications of implementing Jesus’s teaching. It has become a truism to acknowledge that Jesus’s view of acceptable behavior among his followers is anything but intuitive.
Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God; but woe to you who are rich (Matthew 5:3; Luke 6:24; my paraphrase).  

Blessed are those who go hungry, for you will be filled; but woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry (Matthew 5:6; Luke 6:25; my paraphrase).

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you (Luke 6:27–31, NIV 84).

This short collection of Gospel sayings only scratches the surface of what several scholars have described as the upside-down, counterintuitive character of Jesus’s ethical teaching.  

Observing the upside-down nature of the teaching is one thing; figuring out what to do with it in real life is another matter altogether. Here is where Professor Stratton’s visual experiment offers a useful analogy for any disciple trying to implement Jesus’s upside-down ethic in today’s apparently right-side-up world.

Defining what is normal is often a matter of familiarity. If we have known only one way of doing things, then it is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine doing those things in any other way. That
is, until someone with a broader range of experience than ours steps in and demonstrates a new, previously unthought-of alternative, an alternative that may be perfectly natural for the other person. Scientists call this a “paradigm.”

Jesus introduced just such a paradigm shift for his listeners when he announced the arrival of God’s kingdom and described the alternative, counterintuitive behaviors he expected of his disciples, who were new kingdom citizens. Let’s face it. On the surface, a great deal of Jesus’s ethical teaching sounds ridiculous by any sensible standard. We live in a world where, generally speaking, the rich and the well-fed are considered blessed, fortunate, safe, and secure, whereas the poor and the hungry deserve our sympathy—and maybe our donations—but certainly not our envy.

Refusing all claims to retribution (no matter how lawful), allowing others to take advantage of our generosity, offering unmeasured, unqualified benevolence that never expects repayment, not even a tax deductible receipt, is not only upside-down behavior, it is downright irresponsible in many people’s minds. Yet, such upside-down actions are precisely what Jesus says will characterize genuine members of the kingdom of God.

By deciding to follow Jesus, his followers must put on the upside-down goggles of kingdom morality. Initially, Jesus’s way of seeing the world will be disorienting, maybe even frightening. Living as kingdom citizens demands that Jesus’s disciples take significant risks; at the very least, true discipleship
will appear risky from the perspective of our natural and conventional way of viewing life’s decisions.

While we were studying the Sermon on the Mount together in a class, one of my students exclaimed that Jesus could not possibly have meant for us to take his teaching literally. Living out the Sermon on the Mount in any straightforward way, she said, would mean the extinction of the church. Christians would be massively exploited and oppressed out of existence! In lodging this protest, my student was vividly expressing the internal tug-of-war that begins immediately once a person considers Jesus’s kingdom ethic seriously. It is a contest over our heart, mind, will, and obedience.

\[\text{We might well say that Jesus did not intend for us to literally put out our own eye or cut off our own hand, as he said in Matthew 5:29–30. After all, the problem of sin begins in our minds. But Jesus did mean for us to take drastic measures against sin in our lives. Our repentance is an essential aspect of becoming a follower of Christ.}\]
To return to the analogy between Christian discipleship and Professor Stratton’s experiment, Jesus essentially says to us, “Anyone who wants to be my disciple must put on my kingdom goggles and live accordingly. Once you do this, much of what I tell you to do will seem upside-down, backwards, and inside-out. But trust me. I am modeling and teaching you the way that my heavenly Father has always wanted his children to live in this world.”

The good news is that if we persist in wanting to see the world from Jesus’s kingdom perspective and then do what he asks, we will eventually reach that tipping point of familiarity where viewing the world upside-down becomes more and more comfortable. It may never appear right-side up. Following Jesus always remains an exercise in counterintuitive decision-
making, going against the grain, swimming against the current, marching to the beat of a different drummer—or whatever topsy-turvy metaphor you prefer. But, with enough time and experience, living an upside-down life as citizens of the kingdom of God will slowly become more natural to anyone who follows Jesus consistently, for the Holy Spirit’s work of sanctification will conform us more and more to the image of Christ himself. One day you may even go downhill skiing or ride a bicycle with your kingdom goggles on.

Long-term spiritual success is a matter of “fixing our eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:2). Taking our eyes off Jesus, turning away from him, is the equivalent of putting on Professor Stratton’s blindfold. With the upside-down images removed, the older, deep-seated instincts of how we were born and raised to live in a fallen world reassert themselves because they never completely leave us—at least, not in this life. The seemingly “normal,” right-side-up perspective on life only appears to be normal because we are sinners who are most comfortable living out the status quo of our fallen, sinful world. Our own fallenness naturally aligns itself with the fallenness of the world we live in, so that our native preference for living right-side up rather than upside-down is always more than ready to reemerge as a serious contender for control over our ethical and spiritual lives.

This internal debate between seemingly right-side-up and apparently upside-down responses to life’s daily challenges will continue with frustrating predictability until the day we die or the moment Jesus returns on the clouds of heaven. Either way,
only then will we finally be able to see clearly, without doubt, hesitation, or second thoughts, that Jesus’s upside-down way of self-denial, sacrificial service, peace, forgiveness, and unremitting, unconditional mercy is the only true way of living a meaningful life that is pleasing to God. In the meantime, the disciple’s only chance for long-term faithfulness is to wear Jesus’s kingdom goggles 24/7, knowing that eventually Jesus’s kingdom lifestyle will become every disciple’s (super)natural preference.

**Jesus Is the Starting Point**

Jesus’s proclamation of the kingdom of God is a foundational component to his ministry. That Jesus taught about the kingdom of God is hardly controversial nowadays. The New Testament scholar Bruce Malina goes so far as to say, “Even the most skeptical historian would agree that if Jesus spoke about anything, he spoke about the kingdom of heaven.”\(^5\)

I will go one step further. In my estimation, the actual arrival of God’s kingdom in and through Jesus’s earthly ministry is central to his teaching, at least according to the Synoptic Gospels. In fact, we understand the significance of Jesus’s ministry only insofar as we understand his message about the kingdom.

*The Synoptic Gospels* consist of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which are similar in style. John is distinctive in that he sets out to establish Jesus’s divine nature.

A proper view of Christian ethics must begin with a correct understanding of Jesus and his kingdom
teaching. Although this may sound like a foregone conclusion to some readers, others insist that any biblical study of Christian ethics must begin with the apostle Paul, not with Jesus.

But a proper understanding of Christian ethics must begin with Jesus. Why?

First, the priority of focusing on the biblical text, as important as it is, does not mean that those texts must be studied only in chronological order. That claim has the ring of something I am tempted to call the chronological fallacy: a chronological approach to interpretation may be required when investigating how a theme or topic developed over time, but the compositional date of a text (which is frequently subject to debate) should not be confused with the date of the traditions and the ideas contained within that text.

The traditions about Jesus were not the invention of anonymous communities who felt themselves free to invent unhistorical Jesus stories out of nothing more than their own immediate felt needs (such as comfort during times of Roman persecution or exclusion from the synagogue) inflamed by pious, overactive imaginations. We must grant to the earliest Christians what I refer to as a positive presumption of ethical concern, which means that they well understood the difference between passing along complete fabrications as if they were true, on the one hand, and relating the traditions of eyewitnesses burnished with some editorial license, on the other. Even Hays admits that the Gospels, including John’s unique story line, were not invented out of whole cloth. They may not be the literary
equivalents of exact, photographic reproductions of the historical Jesus, but they do make up masterful portraits in which each gospel author captures Jesus’s likeness by preserving and retelling in his own way the earlier traditions about Jesus’s teachings and actions.

There simply is no getting around the fact that Jesus is “the definitive paradigm” for the obedient Christian life and what it means to be in right relationship with the Father. The preferred metaphor in the Synoptic Gospels depicting Christian discipleship is “following Jesus,” with the Lord urging his followers to conform their lives to his.

Obviously, following after Jesus is a particularly apt turn of phrase for the Gospel story line, but the evangelists did not invent it themselves. Paul urges the church in Corinth to “follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Following after Christ Jesus is also Paul’s definition of what it means to live an obedient Christian life for the Roman church (Romans 15:5; see also 1 Peter 2:21; Revelation 14:4). Even though we can never know how much Paul knew about Jesus’s earthly life and ministry, these references demonstrate that Paul was repeating a much wider Christian consensus. Christians were defined as Jesus followers. They were expected to be like Jesus and to conform their lives to his example, which means in effect that Christian ethics must begin with Jesus—not only his teaching but also his personal behavior.

The things that Jesus did, and the Gospel narratives that describe his actions, can contain ethical lessons
every bit as important as the sayings found in Jesus’s ethical instruction. We are not limited to didactic, overtly instructional sayings alone. Jesus also teaches by example. Fortunately, in recent years there have been a number of substantial publications in the field of New Testament ethics from scholars like Richard A. Burridge, David P. Gushee, Glen H. Stassen, and Allen Verhey that all begin from this same starting point: Jesus.8

The New Testament insists on describing its ethics as a Christian ethic, that is required of every Jesus follower. As a distinctly Christian ethic, it is universally applicable to all believers everywhere. There are not different classes of believers, more ethical rigor being expected from some than from others. Because all Christian disciples by definition claim that they are following (or want to follow) Jesus, and since Jesus came to this world bringing the kingdom of God, Christian ethics necessarily begin by embracing Jesus and soaking in everything he has to say about living in his Father’s kingdom. As he tells the disciples, “Your heavenly Father knows [what you need]. But seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness and all these [other] things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:32–33).

**Mark, the Cross-Cultural Communicator**

The gospel according to Mark wastes no time in introducing the core of Jesus’s message. The first sentence declares, “The beginning of the gospel/ good news [Greek: *tou euaggeliou*] about Jesus Christ/ Anointed One [Greek: *Christou*], the Son of God.” The political and religious significance of Mark’s carefully
selected words are lost on the average reader today, but to his original audience this sentence was a thunderous shot across the bow of human history. Mark crafts a brilliant act of cross-cultural communication that would have grabbed both Jewish and Greco-Roman readers by the shoulders, shaking them wide awake.

For Jesus’s fellow Jews, he is declared to be their Anointed One, the Messiah, which is the meaning of the Greek title Christos. More specifically, Jesus is the royal Messiah, the descendant of King David who now takes the ancient royal designation “Son of God” as his own. The Davidic Covenant had promised that a never-ending dynasty would occupy Israel’s throne, and that the king would be God’s own son. Yahweh had declared: “I will be his father, and he will be my son” (2 Samuel 7:14). The royal psalmist remembered God’s promise, “I will proclaim the decree of the Lord: He said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father’” (Psalm 2:7).

God gave the covenant we refer to as “Davidic” when he spoke to Nathan the prophet. This occurred just after Nathan had told David to proceed with his plans to build a temple for the Lord (See 2 Samuel 7:1–16). The covenant is summed up in verse 16: “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”

Furthermore, by referring to this straightforward declaration of Jesus’s royal messiahship as “good news,” Mark ties it together with the prophet Isaiah’s vision of the Servant of the Lord found in Isaiah 61:1, “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on
me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” In other words, Jesus is both the messianic king and the Spirit-filled servant in the Isaiah mold; he combines these two figures into one by proclaiming the gospel message in his own lifetime, and whose life and ministry continue to be the content of the gospel today. Jesus is the proclaimer and the proclaimed, the messenger and the message, the bringer of the good news and its subject matter. The gospel of Luke conveys a similar perspective by describing how Jesus once read Isaiah 61:1 at a synagogue service in his home town of Nazareth and declared, by way of interpretation, that Isaiah’s words were at that very moment being fulfilled in him (Luke 4:16–21). According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus pursued his ministry with a definite messianic self-understanding, announcing the good news about both the coming of God’s kingdom and his own role in its arrival.

Remember, though, this is a cross-cultural sentence that would also grab the attention of a Greco-Roman (gentile) reader who knew nothing at all about Jewish messianism, the prophet Isaiah, or the God of Israel. Mark’s gospel is written in Greek, and the word translated as gospel/good news had a long history in Greek society.

The word euaggelion was commonly used to describe the divine messages delivered through dreams, visions, and oracles to the designated virgins lodged at shrines scattered across the Greek world, places such as Delphi and Korope. It could also be used for announcements of important political
events, especially when those events involved news of military victory. In fact, euaggelion had become a technical term for delivering good news from a distant battlefield about the hometown’s victorious army. Proclaiming good news then passed into Roman usage, where it was closely associated with the elevation of a Caesar in the imperial cult. Announcements about the Caesar’s birthday, his ascension to the throne, or a Roman victory on the battlefield all gave occasion for another proclamation of good news, the gospel.

The title “Son of God” is as reminiscent of the Roman imperial cult as is the word “gospel.” The Roman senate divinized Julius Caesar after his death, elevating him to the status of the “divine Julius” (divus Iulius). Consequently, Julius’s adopted son and successor, Octavian, also known as Augustus, became “son of the divine Julius” (divi Iuli filius), setting a pattern for subsequent Caesars, who were consistently identified as a “son of the divine” (divi filius). Although the Romans understood there was a difference between being deified (divus) and being God (deus), the Greek language was not as clear in maintaining the distinction. Even though no Caesar was ever officially designated “son of God” (dei filius), Greek inscriptions often translated the Latin title “son of the divine” (divi filius) with the Greek words “son of God” (huios theou), the title found in Mark 1:1. Undoubtedly, in the minds of many, the distinction between the two designations was eventually lost.

The opening sentence of Mark’s gospel, then, was every bit as evocative for non-Jewish readers as
it would have been for Jews, and in similar ways. To summarize, Mark’s Greco-Roman reader would have understood that a divine message concerning an imperial, divinized figure, which may have included word of a military victory, is presented in the story of a Jewish preacher named Jesus Christ who lived and died in the land of Palestine. Hearing that message as good news would have been as shockingly inconceivable for the average Roman citizen as it would have been teasingly momentous for the average Jew. Yet, despite these different evaluations of Mark’s words, none of his readers would be surprised to learn that this would-be king, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came announcing the arrival of a new kingdom.
The Kingdom Has Come

Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news (euaggelion) of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (MARK 1:14-15).

Understanding the full significance of Mark’s opening sentence prepares the reader for his following description of Jesus’s announcement about the imminent arrival of a kingdom. Curiously, however, King Jesus does not claim to inaugurate his own kingdom; instead, he announces the arrival of God’s kingdom. Heeding Jesus’s call to first repent and then to believe that what he says about the kingdom is true, which requires a distinctive attitude toward Jesus himself, is a prerequisite for entering into this kingdom when it arrives.

What kind of kingdom, then, is this? We do not normally think of kingdoms as being portable, as “coming” or “arriving.” Kingdoms are typically
stationary, though their borders may expand or contract. Kings are the ones who move about, coming and going.

As the sovereign Creator who spoke the universe into existence, Israel’s God was always understood to be the king of all creation. As the Creator, Yahweh never stopped ruling over all things, making the cosmos God’s kingdom. The psalmists frequently remind us of this fact:

The Lord reigns, he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity (Psalm 93:1–2).

The Old Testament never uses the phrase “kingdom of God”; it prefers to describe the various ways in which “God reigns” as Creator-King over the universe. Wherever God reigns, there is God’s kingdom. Since God reigns over everything and everyone, God’s kingdom is everywhere, including everyone—even encompassing those who do not recognize him.

But our Creator-King is also the covenant-making God who forged a unique relationship with the people of Israel. Thus there are two different, yet related, dimensions of God’s kingship operating simultaneously. While Yahweh reigns over all humanity, whether they recognize it or not, only Israel is blessed with the unique relationship that focuses God’s kingship specifically on their guidance, blessing, and protection. Recall God’s introduction to the Sinai Covenant:
Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5–6).

Israel’s never fully succeeded in becoming the holy, priestly kingdom God had wanted on this earth. Eventually, a new expectation emerged in which God one day would finally accomplish for himself what Israel could never do. In the unspecified future, Israel would be restored to perfect covenant faithfulness, and through them God would rule over all the nations of the earth, finally unifying the two different dimensions of God’s reign as Creator-King and as Covenant-Maker.

Daniel 7 expresses this future hope for God’s kingdom on earth in Daniel’s vision of the heavenly Son of man entering into God’s presence:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:13–14).

In Daniel’s vision, God’s kingdom is the last in a sequence of earthly empires that have been represented by four grotesque hybrids of savage
beasts (Daniel 7:3–12). Significantly, this bestial pattern is broken by the final, divine kingdom, which is represented by a human being, one who is interpreted as being the representative of all God’s righteous people (Daniel 7:18, 22, 27). The message is clear. Human empires are constructed and maintained by savagery and violence. Only God can establish and then reign over a humane kingdom founded on the power of universal righteousness, justice, and mercy that will never end.

Similarly, the prophet Isaiah anticipated a restored Israel delivered from exile and beautifully reestablished on Mount Zion as a beacon of holiness and righteousness to the entire world.

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news [euaggelizomenou], who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings [euaggelizomenos], who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (Isaiah 52:7)

Isaiah’s gospel announcement that “your God reigns” is the Old Testament equivalent of Jesus’s preaching the good news that the kingdom of God has come near. Such passages as these would be loudly and harmoniously resonating in the background (or even in the foreground) for any first-century Palestinian audience, stirring up a chorus of anticipation every time Jesus spoke about the imminent activity of God’s reign on earth. No wonder Mark tells us that the “news about [Jesus] spread quickly” (Mark 1:28), and, at least initially, “the people came to him from everywhere” (Mark 1:45). Jesus was announcing the
arrival of God’s long-anticipated redemptive reign, the saving sovereignty of the Lord Almighty revealed here and now in living color as God actually showed up to rescue his people and to set the world straight:

- to free them from demonic oppression (Mark 1:21–28, 34);
- to heal them (Mark 1:29–34, 40–45; 2:1–12; 3:1–5);
- to forgive their sins (Mark 2:1–12);
- to form a new, inclusive community composed of all those who received God’s forgiveness through trust in Jesus (Mark 2:15–20).

Jesus’s earthly ministry is God the Father’s invasion of history as the royal Liberator, the gracious, Spirit-empowered Savior intervening to rescue his people from the power of sin, oppression, and injustice, restoring them to a right covenantal relationship, as Yahweh establishes his universal, redemptive reign on earth.

But Jesus also embarked on a radical redefinition of this kingdom and what its establishment would look like, cutting it free from many traditional assumptions. Of course, the most prominent point of redefinition involved the necessity of a suffering, dying Messiah who is enthroned on a cross, who reigns now through the community of followers who accept the necessity of their own suffering as an essential component of their commitment to follow Jesus. More immediately in Mark’s unfolding drama, Jesus’s initial collection of parables explores a variety of unexpected kingdom twists (Mark 4:1–34).
Most significantly, God’s kingdom does not come with overwhelming, irresistible force, knocking people off their feet and sweeping them irrevocably into its iron net; nor is the kingdom’s arrival self-evident—just the opposite. The kingdom’s appearance easily goes unnoticed because God’s reign begins within individual human hearts, where it seeks out the fertilizer of faith. This is why Jesus’s kingdom parables focus on such traits as individual seeds with idiosyncratic growth rates, various types of soils making different contributions to the end product, differing responses to the kingdom message, the tininess of the gospel seeds, the kingdom’s minuscule beginnings, and the fact that initial responses develop in fits and starts and sometimes fail to reach completion. All of these observations highlight the personal nature of God’s redemptive reign over individual lives.

The redemptive reign of God does not grow in the abstract by gaining control over systems, organizations, collectives, cultures, political parties, or governments. The saving sovereignty of God’s reign on earth expands as more and more individuals surrender themselves to the lordship of Jesus and trust in his proclamation of good news. These acts of personal surrender to Jesus and his message enlarge the membership—the citizenship of God’s kingdom—which is the only means of kingdom growth described anywhere in the Gospels. The kingdom expands as individuals surrender themselves to God’s saving sovereignty. Jesus’s disciples become the new citizens of God’s coming kingdom.
Jesus’s diverse farming/husbandry metaphors also highlight how irrelevant human activity is to the growth of God’s kingdom. Nowhere in the Gospels does human effort contribute anything whatsoever to the kingdom’s advancement, development, or success. The kingdom of God is just that—God’s. It is a matter of God’s reign coming to God’s people in God’s way at the moment of God’s choosing.\textsuperscript{16} Jesus says: “Night and day, whether [the farmer] sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain” (Mark 4:27–28). Jesus’s point is clear: while the planter sleeps, the kingdom grows all by itself. God’s saving sovereignty expands through the spiritual dynamic at work between the gospel of Jesus Christ (the seed) and the individual recipient (the soil). Each new confessing, repentant, forgiven, renewed, and trusting sinner whose life is redirected by following after Jesus is evidence of the kingdom’s borders expanding step by individual step, one person at a time through the saving sovereignty of our God.
Christian theology has not always been attentive to Jesus’s teaching and the evidence in the Gospels describing the kingdom of God. There has been a deep-seated tendency to connect the coming of the kingdom to human activity in ways that tie the kingdom’s arrival and development to any number of social programs, political agendas, or the work of cultural engagement. For instance, a congregational hymn often included in the worship portion of my former college’s annual graduation ceremony includes these chorus lines: “Lord, to you our hands and hearts we offer; keep us faithful to your call, we pray. Guide in us the work that brings your kingdom, as we rest in you.”
While it sounds appropriately pious to ask that God help us do “the work that brings the kingdom,” as we have seen, there is no warrant in the Gospels for such prayers. Jesus does teach us to pray that God will cause his kingdom to come (Matthew 6:10), so perhaps we may consider prayer to be a secondary “work” for the kingdom. Otherwise, the closest we can come to laboring for the kingdom is by doing the work of evangelism, following the model left to us by Jesus himself: proclaiming the gospel, calling for repentance, and having conversations with the inquisitive as regular acts of very generous seed-sowing.

Unfortunately, the human inability to grow the kingdom seems difficult for God’s people to accept. Whether it is due to our overly activist inclinations or from harboring too lofty an opinion of ourselves, the church regularly neglects Jesus’s unequivocal voice in the Gospels in order to give itself an active role in causing the kingdom to come or to otherwise misconstrue the significance of God’s redemptive reign on earth.

Different traditions have implemented this misunderstanding in different ways, though they all are born of similar mistakes. Going back at least as far as Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), the German theologian and guardian of Protestant liberalism, large swaths of the Protestant church have tended to identify the kingdom of God with moral and humanistic programs of social reformation, assuming that God’s kingdom on earth is established by social and political activism to rectify society’s ills and bring humanity under God’s universal rule of
love. According to Ritschl, the church is “called to make the Kingdom of God its task . . . [seeking] the moral unification of the human race, through action prompted by universal love to our neighbor.” A similar perspective informed the influential theology of Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918), the father of the Social Gospel movement in America.

Another version of such kingdom-activism appears in the increasingly influential theology of neo-Calvinism, as developed by Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), the Dutch clergyman, philosopher, theologian, and politician (prime minister of the Netherlands). I suspect that Kuyper remained deeply influenced by his early education in theological liberalism, despite his preference for emphasizing the Creator’s “cultural mandate”—as opposed to universal love—for humanity and for charging disciples as redeemed humanity to work toward cultural transformation. While Kuyperian neo-Calvinism may not directly assert that God’s kingdom arrives or grows through the creation of a Christian culture, at times the rhetoric comes precariously close to saying just that.

In his book The Calvinistic Concept of Culture, the late Henry Van Til (1906–1961), who was a professor at Calvin College, the school where I formerly taught, warns his readers that “the kingdom of God is not established by man’s cultural striving,” although it is unclear whose cultural striving he is referring to, Christian or non-Christian. On the other hand, he counterbalances this single statement about God’s kingdom with multiple warnings about the necessity of a thoroughly Christian society as the prerequisite
for the Christian community’s attempts to “lead wholly Christian lives.” The life of society and the life of the church are so interwoven with each other, according to Van Til, as to become thoroughly interdependent. Elsewhere, Van Til highlights the urgency for Christians to build “a Christian culture in order that the Christian faith survive.”

In effect, Van Til interprets Jesus’s charge that the disciples “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33) as a call to “seek first the creation of a Christian culture so that you may be able to live righteously.” One can only wonder how the earliest disciples ever managed to make a go of it, surrounded as they were by what could only be judged an utterly non-Christian culture.

I suspect that the trap into which some fall is the desire to create a Christian culture in order to lead comfortable Christian lives, free from inconvenience, disadvantage, and the threat of suffering. Jesus and the apostles, however, were convinced that the hostility aimed at them by the surrounding culture, no matter how harsh, had no bearing whatsoever on their prospects of remaining faithful citizens of God’s kingdom. As far as the New Testament is concerned, suffering accompanies obedient discipleship like ticks on a dog. We should not forget Jesus’s words of congratulations: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10). Experiencing antagonism from those who stand outside the kingdom is an identifying characteristic of true kingdom citizenship.

Furthermore, living out those implications in the
kingdom’s upside-down Jesus lifestyle may even prove attractive to many observers in the watching world. Undoubtedly, this is what Jesus had in mind when he told the disciples: “You are the salt of the earth. . . . You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:13–16). But imagining that living a faithful kingdom lifestyle is the equivalent of building the kingdom on earth is a bit like putting the cart before the horse. Confusing cause with effect in this way is a real mistake.

Others have confused the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus with the Creator’s universal sovereignty over the universe. America was founded by adherents to this particular view of God’s kingdom—especially the Puritans. H. Richard Niebuhr describes their perspective:

This kingdom of God was not . . . something that came into the world from without; it was rather the rule which, having been established from eternity, needed to be obeyed despite the rebellion against it which flourished in the world. It may be likened to the rule of a universal Caesar against whom ignorant tribes had made vain rebellion.22

Buried within this brand of kingdom theology is the assumption that all of human history is unfolding exactly as the sovereign God has always intended. In my opinion, that is a debatable assumption. But if you hold this view of history, it is a short step from there to imagining that my own personal history, the history of
my specific nation, my ethnic group, or my religious organization is the fulfillment of the Creator-King’s purposes for my particular stream of human events. In other words, the history of my country, church, or people group is the realization of God’s kingdom on earth. For some, the kingdom of God becomes a society dominated by the church (my church, of course, not anyone else’s church, unless your church happens to be affiliated with my church), since the church is the expression of God’s sovereign agency in history.

Many Puritan leaders came to the New World believing that they would establish the kingdom of God and build the new Zion in the new Promised Land through their establishment of a specific religious society. They had precedent for these convictions: their English forebears had long believed, as John Eliot, missionary to the Algonquins in colonial Massachusetts, had written, that “England [was] first in that blessed work of setting up the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus” in the New World.23

Thus the early seeds were sown for the development of Manifest Destiny, American exceptionalism, and the misguided notion that the United States is God’s chosen agent for bringing righteousness and the blessings of God’s kingdom to the rest of the world.24

We cannot forget, of course, that the Old Testament does insist that the Creator is always king over all the earth, so that there is a sense in which God is, in fact, the “universal Caesar against whom ignorant tribes had made vain rebellion.” However, we have also seen both Testaments affirm that God’s rule eventually will be accepted universally—
remember that all the nations of the earth will come streaming to Mount Zion—as the nations respond to the light emanating from God’s chosen, covenant people (Isaiah 2:2–5; 43:10; 49:6; 51:4–5; 55:1–5; 56:6–8; 60:1–22; Micah 4:1–5).

Jesus picks up this theme and makes it more pointed. It is the kingdom of God as he proclaimed it, beginning as the tiniest mustard seed, that eventually “grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds of the air can perch in its shade” (Mark 4:32). The church cannot establish this kingdom by prevailing as the dominant force in society, by writing a nation’s civil legislation, by creating competitive alternatives to secular labor unions or public schools, or even by eliminating poverty—as marvelous as that would be.

No particular stream of human history, activity, or ideology can egotistically claim the mantle of God’s authorized, providential kingdom-bringer. History’s one and only kingdom-bringer is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And the kingdom brought by that kingdom-bringer only grows as the heavenly Father opens the eyes of more and more lost sinners, who then surrender themselves to Jesus, their Savior, Lord, and King.

Neither Paul, nor Peter, nor the author of Hebrews sees the kingdom as a heavenly, otherworldly entity existing apart from this world, despite their use of heavenly language. References to the “heavenly kingdom” simply recall the disciples’ anticipation of the kingdom’s “not yet” aspect waiting to be implemented when the enthroned, glorified Jesus “comes on the
clouds from heaven” (Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62). Thus the early church prayed, “Maranatha! Come, O Lord” (1 Corinthians 16:22, my translation), knowing full well that they were asking for the finalization of the kingdom coming from heaven to earth. As for the worldly here and now, the social and moral strangeness of the Christian community provides temporal and immediate evidence that the kingdom of God has come—already, but not yet.

Kingdom citizens are anticipating the future establishment of an earthly theocracy, that is, God’s direct, immediate rule over this earth when Christ returns. The church is called to wait, worship, pray, and obey while anticipating their coming king. Just as the ministry of evangelism is the closest any disciple can come to building the kingdom on earth, living out a kingdom lifestyle is the most the church can do for hastening Christ’s return and translating the “not yet” into the “right here, right now” kingdom of God.

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ENDNOTES
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