

**A Kingdom Without a King? Evaluating the Kingdom Ethic(s) of the Emerging Church**  
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**Introduction**

The missional impulse of the Emerging church has generated much publicity and has challenged the evangelical church to rethink its views on culture, gospel presentation, incarnational living, and social action. Many Emerging church leaders have chosen to utilize the Kingdom of God as the paradigm for their revisioning of church theology and praxis, rightly noting the biblical emphasis on the Kingdom of God, not least of which appears in the teachings of Jesus. When one looks at Scripture, one is forced to admit that the Church in most of its evangelical expressions has not shared the Kingdom focus that seems to permeate the Gospels and New Testament epistles. But naked reference to any biblical teaching could amount to theological theme dropping that is void of content. When this is the case, “Kingdom” references could be just a means of justifying a shift in priorities, while not being faithful to the biblical witness. In this article, I want to evaluate the Emerging church theology of the Kingdom. I will conclude that though the impulse to have the Kingdom of God shape church praxis must be affirmed and heeded, its deficient understanding of the Kingdom will invariably lead to an abandonment of the gospel in favor of theologically empty social action.

**What is the Emergent Church?**

Trying to define the Emerging Church is a bit like herding cats. The movement is constituted by individuals and communities that resist labels and categorization on ideological grounds. Nevertheless, there are some characteristics common to the Emerging church. In their

book, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger describe Emerging Churches as “missional communities arising from within postmodern culture and consisting of followers of Jesus who are seeking to be faithful in their place and time.”<sup>1</sup> Lauran A Kerr describes the Emerging church as,

. . . a movement that seeks to ‘reach and engage the emerging culture’ by leading ‘missional, kingdom-minded’ lives, recover early church tradition and vision, operate organically with fewer constrictive structures, focus on its members as a community and a collective entity, and appreciate and include the arts.<sup>2</sup>

Gibbs and Bolger characterize the Emerging church by the following nine distinctives:

Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform secular space, (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities.<sup>3</sup>

Gibbs’s book is perhaps already dated in that the Emerging church movement now distinguishes between Emerging churches and Emergent churches. It is critical to understand in any discussion of the Emerging church or the Emergent church that the term “emerging” is used of a broad group, while the term “emergent,” when properly used, refers to churches or leaders that comprise a specific part of the Emerging movement.<sup>4</sup> In other words, every Emergent

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<sup>1</sup>Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 28. They also describe the Emerging Church as applying to “high-profile, youth-oriented congregations that have gained attention on account of their rapid growth; their ability to attract (or retain) twenty-somethings; their contemporary worship, which draws from popular music styles; and their ability to promote themselves to the Christian subculture through websites and by word of mouth.” Ibid., 41.

<sup>2</sup>Lauran A. Kerr, “Women in the Emerging Church,” *Reformation and Revival Journal* 14:3 (2005), 141.

<sup>3</sup>Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 45.

<sup>4</sup>As Dan Kimball, author of the book, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) explains, “the term ‘Emerging church’ refers to “churches who were missional and ‘being the church’ in our emerging culture.” Dan Kimball, “Origin of the terms ‘Emerging’ and ‘Emergent’ church - Part 1,” [on-line]; accessed 29 October 2007; available from [http://www.dankimball.com/vintage\\_faith/2006/04/origin\\_of\\_the\\_t.html](http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04/origin_of_the_t.html); Internet. He goes on to explain that the term ‘Emerging church,’ “simply meant churches who (sic) were focusing on the mission of Jesus and thinking about the Kingdom in our emerging culture.” Ibid. In 2001, the term “emergent” was first used by the Leadership Networks Young Leaders Network. Those who participated in this group eventually started another

church is part of the broad Emerging church movement, though not every Emerging church is considered an Emergent church.<sup>5</sup> To illustrate, Robert E. Webber described the leaders, strategy, theology, and ethos of the Emerging church in his book, *The Young Evangelicals*.<sup>6</sup> Some of whom he writes would happily fit under the “Emergent” label (such as Brian McLaren, founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Fellowship in Maryland) ; others (such as Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Fellowship in Seattle, WA) would not.<sup>7</sup> Driscoll offers a helpful taxonomy when he suggests that there are three distinct types of Christians in the Emerging church: Relevants, Reconstructionists, and Revisionists.<sup>8</sup>

In this article, the criticisms will be true of every Emergent church that I have encountered, but not true of every Emerging church. Nevertheless, I will speak of the Emerging church in my analysis, rather than the Emergent church, because the seeds of the problems that I have discovered are present in many of the Emerging churches, regardless of where they land on

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group, coalescing under the internet domain name, emergentvillage.com.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, the range of theological positions represented in Robert Webber, ed., *Listening to the Beliefs of the Emerging Churches* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

<sup>6</sup>Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

<sup>7</sup>Not all who are committed to “focusing on the mission of Jesus and thinking about the Kingdom in our emerging culture” would identify with the theology or praxis of the Emergent Village. Some are openly critical of the theology and praxis of Emergent church leaders and have gone out of their way to differentiate themselves from the Emergent church. See, for example, Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation: Reaching out without Selling out* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 11-23. D. A. Carson’s book, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, though it provides an excellent critique of Brian McLaren and those on the Emergent side of the Emerging church spectrum, does not address the diversity present in the Emerging church. See D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>8</sup>Mark Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3:2 (2006), 89-90. He explains, “Relevants” represent theologically conservative evangelicals who are interested in reshaping the articulation and practice of theology rather than the content. “Reconstructionists” represent those who are interested in rethinking church forms and structures because current forms have been ineffective in postmodern culture. “Revisionists” represent theologically liberal Christians who are critical of key evangelical doctrines, questioning their utility in postmodern culture.

the spectrum. Also, there has been much written that both describes and critiques the Emerging church movement, and it is not my desire to repeat the work of others here. The burden of this article is to explain and evaluate the Kingdom theology that drives much of Emerging church theology and praxis. To that end, I have chosen only those elements that specifically relate to the Emerging church's use of the Kingdom of God as a paradigm for cultural engagement and ecclesiological change.

### **Reaction against the Modern Church and Christian Subculture**

Most of the literature written by and about Emerging church leaders makes it clear that much of what the Emerging church embodies is a direct reaction against perceived deficiencies in the modern churches in which its members grew up. D. A. Carson, in his book, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, suggests that protest is what characterizes the Emerging church.<sup>9</sup> The reaction against the modern church (for many Emerging church leaders, the "modern church" is the "megachurch") is typically embodied in Emerging church buzzwords such as "missional," "authentic," "relational," "incarnational," and "narrative."

Because Emerging churches self-characterize as those that are thinking missionally about the culture, leaders in the Emerging fold are typically drawn to books and teaching on missiology before they read church growth books. In that sense, David Bosch and Lesslie Newbigin have had a larger impact on the Emerging church than has Bill Hybels or Rick Warren.<sup>10</sup> Seeking to live missionally, Emerging churches are critical of church organizations

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<sup>9</sup>Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 14-41. The protest of the Emerging Church is against such things as spiritual isolationism, spiritual darwinism, theological reductionism, modernism, seeker-sensitive churches and megachurches.

<sup>10</sup>Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 49.

that spend most of their time and energy preparing for the service—even (or perhaps especially) if the goal of the service is to attract the unchurched. A church that is thinking missionally about the culture will reverse the energy distribution and dedicate their resources to going out, reaching out, and serving in the community rather than seeking to attract people to them.<sup>11</sup> An emerging church is one that shifts “from being consumer oriented to mission oriented.”<sup>12</sup> Ray S. Anderson offers a helpful analysis when he writes:

Too often, I fear, when the church attempts to make disciples out of Christians by urging them to follow Christ what is really intended is to mobilize the members of the church to take up church-related ministries and to develop their own interior religious life. A disciple of Christ is not intended to be a little messiah but to participate in the messianic mission to extend the kingdom into every crevice and corner of the world.<sup>13</sup>

When the church begins to think missionally about the culture, then not only will its priorities and convictions shift,<sup>14</sup> but the church will come to understand that it has a symbiotic relationship with the culture.<sup>15</sup> The bifurcation between secular and sacred is dismissed as artificial and misleading. A holistic approach to all of life is employed where spiritual activities, so often pushed to the margins of life in the modern era, are to be carried out in the context of culture.<sup>16</sup> The church can not exist in a culture-less vacuum; indeed, the culture gives voice and expression

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<sup>11</sup>“Missional Schools Project with Ryan Bolger- Video.” accessed 29 October 2007; available from [http://www.allelon.org/resources/netcasts/wimc\\_rbolger.cfm](http://www.allelon.org/resources/netcasts/wimc_rbolger.cfm); Internet.

<sup>12</sup>Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 95.

<sup>13</sup>Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 115.

<sup>14</sup>For example, Karen Ward of Church of the Apostles in Seattle explains, “The cultural view ‘gets’ that Jesus was for the marginalized and the oppressed. It is only the church that needs to be trained to look at Jesus again.” Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 48.

<sup>15</sup>Doug Pagitt, “The Emerging Church and Embodied Theology,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of the Emerging Churches*, ed. Robert Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 128-29.

<sup>16</sup>As Gibbs and Bolger write, “The clarion call of the emerging church is Psalm 24:1: ‘The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it.’” Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 67.

to the church as it seeks to live out its various mandates. Therefore, theology should be fluid and strategic. Rather than a theologically-driven mission, Emerging churches often see theology as a discipline of mission. As Brian McLaren explains, “Theology is the church on a mission reflecting on its message, its identity, its meaning.”<sup>17</sup> In the minds of many Emerging church leaders, the Kingdom of God provides a ready platform for rethinking the theology and praxis of the church.

### **The Emergent church and the Kingdom**

There can be no doubt that the evangelical church teaching on and discussion of the Kingdom of God does not match the biblical emphasis. Emerging church leaders are quick to point out that Jesus only mentioned the church twice in his teachings while elaboration on the Kingdom of God saturates the Gospels. Both John the Baptist’s preparatory message and the preaching of Jesus is summarized in the Gospel of Matthew by “Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand” (Matthew 3:1; 4:17). The content of Jesus’ parables invariably focused on the Kingdom. After the resurrection and just prior to the ascension, Jesus continues to teach on the Kingdom in Acts 1:3 and the book of Acts ends with the Apostle Paul proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom while in Rome (Acts 28:30-31).

So what is the Kingdom of God in Emerging church thought? Listen, for example, to

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<sup>17</sup>Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 105. Dan Kimball notes, “I see the idea of the emerging church as more of a mind-set about theology. I view the term ‘emerging church’ as describing those who notice culture is changing and are not afraid to do deep ecclesiological thinking as we’re on an adventurous mission together for the gospel of Jesus.” Dan Kimball, “The Emerging Church and Missional Theology,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, ed. Robert Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 84.

Brian McLaren's treatment of the Kingdom.<sup>18</sup> He offers his most extensive work on the Kingdom in his book, *The Secret Message of Jesus*.<sup>19</sup> McLaren analyzes the prophetic anticipation of the prophets and reduces it to 1) An emphasized concern for the poor, forgotten and outcasts; 2) inward sincerity of the heart rather than behavioral transformation; 3) judgment on injustice and hypocrisy; and 4) a new world order is possible.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately he summarizes the kingdom (in an admittedly non-satisfying definition) as "an extraordinary life to the full centered in a relationship with God."<sup>21</sup>

### **The Gospel Revisioned**

Perhaps the most significant reaction along Kingdom lines by the Emerging church against the modern church is in understanding and articulating the gospel.<sup>22</sup> The emerging generations, put off by the perceived lack of social concern in the modern church, reject the message of the gospel as "go-to-heaven-when-you-die." Ignoring that caricature of the modern church's articulation of the gospel for the present, it is important to highlight the strong impetus among the emerging generations to ask, "Shouldn't the Christian faith have significance now,

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<sup>18</sup>McLaren even confesses some discomfort with the terms king, kingship, kingdom, and reign. They "feel archaic—quaintly archaic or barbarously archaic." McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 80. He also suggests Jesus would not even use Kingdom language today. Because the kingdom of God is a "liberating, barrier-breaking, domination-shattering, reconciling movement." He believes Jesus might speak today of the dream of God, the revolution of God, the mission of God, the party of God, the network of God, and the dance of God. Idem, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything* (Nashville: Word Publishing Group, 2006), 139-147.

<sup>19</sup>McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>22</sup>Emerging church leaders are often at the forefront of the conversation on rethinking the atonement. But how did we get to that point? See Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves in: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 100-108; .

especially in a global sense?” McLaren explains,

But now I wonder if this gospel about how to get your soul into Heaven after death is really only a ghost of the real gospel that Jesus talked about, which seemed to have something to do with God’s will being done on earth now, not just in Heaven later. . . . Yes, I believe that the gospel has facts that deal with forgiveness of sins, but I feel unfaithful to Jesus to define the gospel by that one facet when I see our contemporary churches failing to address so many other essential gospel concerns—justice, compassion, sacrifice, purpose, transformation into Christlikeness, and ultimate hope.<sup>23</sup>

Instead, the gospel is about “social transformation arising from the presence and permeation of the reign of Christ.”<sup>24</sup> The message is embodied in the Emerging church’s understanding of the gospel of the Kingdom. During Christ’s first advent ministry, he did not offer a simple message of personal salvation; rather, he invited those who would follow him, the opportunity to “participate in God’s redemption of the world.”<sup>25</sup> Understanding the gospel of the Kingdom in this way has significant implications. As one Emerging church leader explained,

We have totally reprogrammed ourselves to recognize the good news as a means to an end—that the kingdom of God is here. We try to live into that reality and hope. We don’t dismiss the cross; it is still a central part. But the good news is not that he died but that the kingdom has come.<sup>26</sup>

The transition to thinking about the Kingdom occurred when emerging church leaders changed their focus from the biblical epistles to the Gospels.<sup>27</sup> Barry Taylor of Sanctuary in Santa Monica explains, “I needed to stop reading Paul for a while and instead focus on Jesus. . .

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<sup>23</sup>Brian D. McLaren, “The Method, the Message, and the Ongoing Story,” in Sweet, Leonard, ed. *The church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Sweet, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 213. Michael Horton points out that most of what is on McLaren’s list are human works and, therefore, cannot be identified with the gospel. Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 60.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 56. Gibbs and Bolger state, “Emerging churches have adopted this restored understanding of the gospel, and it has dramatically transformed the way they train both new and not-so-new Christians in the faith.” Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>27</sup>This is strikingly similar to the “Red Letter Christian (RLC)” phenomenon that Tony Campolo and others are currently championing.

We focused on the humanity of Jesus and lost all the categories from church history.”<sup>28</sup> This begs for the question to be addressed: Can there be a Kingdom, in the biblical sense, with an impoverished or distorted Christology? Can you have the Kingdom of God without Christ the King?

### **Ecclesiology Revisioned (or Ignored?)**

In Emerging church life, the Kingdom of God paradigm is used as a tool to deconstruct all aspects of church life and polity. For example, Doug Pagitt, the pastor of Solomon’s Porch in Minneapolis, MN, sees the church as “not necessarily the center of God’s intentions. God is working in the world, and the church has the option to join God or not.”<sup>29</sup> When a Kingdom approach is embraced then the place of the church can be reduced. Energies heretofore given to the church can then be directed toward the broader Kingdom of God. Anderson attempts to provide the theological justification for this shift, when he writes,

The writers of the Gospels only mention the church twice, with no suggestion that it was the purpose of Jesus to create it as a separate and sacred place. . . . He did not come to build a kingdom here on earth, but to empower others to kingdom living. While the church tends to differentiate itself from the world by its religious nature, the kingdom of God penetrates and transforms the world by its secular nature. This is why the Spirit of Christ calls us to be disciples of the kingdom rather than of the church.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 48. Ray Anderson explains his view of the emergent Christ of Christology: “No wonder emerging churches find more certainty in going back to the naive realism of the New Testament when they claim that it is more about Christ than just Christology. It is not my intention to supplant the formal dogma of christology with a ‘Jesus only’ experiential theology, but rather to suggest that the emerging church is about the contemporary presence of the historical Christ.” Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*, 45.

<sup>29</sup>Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 42. Pagitt also writes, “The goal of Christian community is to be a living place of the hopes and aspirations of God. In this way, Christian community serves as a hermeneutic of the gospel. The lives of the people of the community go beyond individual expressions and become the way that insiders and outsiders experience the life of God.” Doug Pagitt, “The Emerging Church and Embodied Theology,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, ed. Robert Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 127.

<sup>30</sup>Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*, 111.

The kingdom is used to speak against contemporary church structure: Dieter Zander of Quest Church in Novato, CA explains, “It is not about church form but the kingdom. The kingdom transcends all forms.”<sup>31</sup> Mark Palmer of Landing Place in Columbus explains, “It is not that we don’t do church planting any more. It is just that we begin with Jesus and the kingdom.”<sup>32</sup>

There is the conviction that the Kingdom of God is expressed and found most often outside the confines of the established church and existing religious structures. For example, Mark Scandrette of ReIMAGINE! in San Francisco explains, “We got the questions wrong. We started out thinking about what form the church should take, as opposed to what the life of Jesus means in this time and place. Now, instead of being preoccupied with new forms of church we focus on seeking the kingdom as the people of God.”<sup>33</sup>

Again, questions arise. What is the role of ecclesiology in a faithful biblical theology of the Kingdom? Can the church be ignored in a praxis of the Kingdom? Given the revisionism that takes place in Emerging church theology, the importance of rightly understanding the biblical teaching on the Kingdom of God is paramount.

### **What is the Kingdom?**

Any discussion of the Kingdom of God has to begin with the Lord Jesus Christ, not merely because he spoke openly and often of the Kingdom, but because, as we will develop throughout the remainder of this article, Jesus saw himself as, and was indeed, the promised King of the Kingdom of God. But, Jesus did not arrive on the scene in first century Israel with a new

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<sup>31</sup>Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 60.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 60.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 49.

message in an ideological vacuum.<sup>34</sup> Rather, Jesus placed himself squarely in the middle and at the forefront of the biblical story. In Mark 1:14-15, Jesus was “proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.’” The use of the word “fulfilled” (πεπληρωται) indicates that Jesus believed his kingdom was the answer to “well-known expectations based on past promises.”<sup>35</sup> That is, when he announced that the Kingdom of God was at hand, he anticipated that his hearers would understand his proclamation as an announcement that the time of waiting was over, the same Kingdom of God that was promised by the prophets was finally here.<sup>36</sup> Jesus was presenting himself as the center of redemptive history and announcing that the grand story of human history finds its fulfillment and culmination in him.

It is crucial therefore, to understand the biblical anticipation of the Kingdom and its King. Jesus certainly did, because when he announced the nearness of the Kingdom, the nature of the Kingdom that he announced had already been developed by the Old Testament prophets. Therefore, in order to understand the Kingdom of God, we must understand how it fits into redemptive history. I will argue that it is precisely at this point that what masquerades in the Emerging church as the Kingdom of God is entirely deficient. To put it simply, many Emerging church leaders do not understand the Kingdom of God, because they do not understand the biblical story.

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<sup>34</sup>R. T. France writes, “The phrase ‘the kingdom of God’ may not yet have been widely used, but all the raw materials are there. Thus, when Jesus began his mission with the words ‘The kingdom of God has come near,’ he would be sure of a ready hearing and would not be misunderstood.” R. T. France, “Kingdom of God,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 421.

<sup>35</sup>Graeme Goldsworthy, “Kingdom of God,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 616.

<sup>36</sup>Notice that Joseph of Arimathea is said to be “looking for the kingdom of God” (Mark 15:43).

## **Old Testament Anticipation of the Kingdom of God**

There are three strands of prophetic anticipation that together constitute the cord of understanding that ought to have been present in the hearers of Jesus' Kingdom proclamation. First, the Kingdom would arrive when God reestablishes his recognized rule over the entire earth. In much prophecy, this coming rule would correspond with the Lord's rescue of Israel and the restoration of her fortunes. Isaiah 2:2-4 speaks of the Lord judging from Jerusalem and exercising a rule of peace, justice and righteousness. Micah 4:1-8 promises that a day will come when the nations will flow to the mountain of the Lord to learn his ways and walk in his paths. Peace and prosperity will characterize that time. Judgment was a necessary part of the Old Testament anticipation because the Kingdom would not come without the terrifying "Day of the Lord" (see Amos 5:18-20; 8:8-9; Isa 13:1-22; Ezek 7:1-27; Mal 3:1-6; 4:1-6). The Kingdom culminates in the restoration of the heavens and the earth, the new creation (Isaiah 65-66). This time is summarized beautifully in Zechariah 14:9, "And the LORD will be king over all the earth. On that day the LORD will be one and his name one" (Zech 14:9; see also Zech 14:16-17; Isa 24-25).

Second, the Kingdom would arrive when the Spirit of God is poured out on God's people in an unprecedented way. Isaiah 32 speaks of horrific judgement upon the land and the people of Israel:

. . . until the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places (Isa 32:15-18).

Ezekiel prophesies, in the context of the New Covenant promises, that when the Spirit is poured

out, peace, prosperity and forgiveness will be the order of the day and the people of God will be caused to walk according to his ways (Ezek 36:26-30).

Third, the Kingdom would arrive when the throne of the anointed Davidic heir, the Messiah, is reestablished; that is, the coming eschatological kingdom will be ruled by a Davidic King. Amos 9:11 declares, “In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old.” Isaiah 9:7 declares, “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.”

Of course, the wonder of Jesus Christ is that he brought all three strands of the Kingdom cord together in his one person. The prophet Isaiah told Israel that the Anointed One, the Messiah, would be “a shoot from the stump of Jesse,” and that “The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD” (Isa 9:1-2). Isaiah goes on to say that the Messiah will judge with equity, and will bring justice to the nations (Isa 9:3-4). The Spirit-anointed one will be characterized by righteousness and faithfulness, and his reign will be characterized by the same (Isa 9:5). In fact, the entire cosmos will be subjugated to the Messiah and the created order will no longer rise up to bite humanity, “for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isa 9:6-8; cf. Isa 42:1). When Jesus begins his public ministry by teaching in the synagogue at Nazareth, we are told that Jesus “unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor . . .’” (Luke 4:17-18). Jesus, the Spirit-anointed one, the Messiah and Son of God, brings the saving rule of God to earth.

## **The Kingdom's Role in the Story of Redemptive History**

So what is the Kingdom of God? What is the nature of the Kingdom, developed by the prophets and anticipated by his hearers, that Jesus proclaimed? The biblical testimony to the Kingdom is so immense, that the term resists an exhaustive definition. G. E. Ladd suggests that the Kingdom is “primarily the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God, and derivatively, the sphere in which the rule is experienced.”<sup>37</sup> This is a fine treatment, but without an understanding of biblical theology, it too could be misleading or misconstrued. After all, the Kingdom of God is promised, predicted, and comes as the answer to a serious problem. This problem and solution comprises the plotline to the drama of redemptive history.

The Bible begins, not with an argument for the existence of God, but with God creating. He is established from the opening page as the Creator of the heavens and earth, and as such, he enjoys Creator's rights, authority, over all that he has made. There is nothing in all of the cosmos that is not subservient to him. Interestingly, many psalms celebrate the kingship of God precisely because he is Creator (Ps 93:1; 96:4-10; 104:1-35; 136:1-9).<sup>38</sup> God creates man and woman, unique among all of creation because they and they alone are created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). As his image-bearers, God grants to them a delegated authority to rule and exercise dominion over the rest of creation (Gen 1:28-29). But God's representatives on earth, his image-bearers, rebel against him, introducing sin into the good creation of God (Gen 3:1-7). Within one generation, brother kills brother and all of humanity is united in their rebellion against God (Gen 4:1-16; 6:5-6; 11:1-9). These are the opening scenes in the grand drama of the

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<sup>37</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 109.

<sup>38</sup>The structure for this brief summary is based on Graeme Goldsworthy, “Kingdom of God,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 618-19.

biblical story. The rest of redemptive history demonstrates how God redeems his people, with the goal that he might dwell with them (Rev 20-21), and restores his kingdom, to the end that his rule might be acknowledged by all (Phil 2:9-11). This entire work of God is accomplished through and focused upon the Lord Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

### **The Kingdom: Points of Tension**

As one surveys the biblical teaching on the Kingdom of God, accounting for its progressive revelation and unfolding in time, there are themes that must be allowed to stay in tension. These themes have confounded theologians for years, and it is wiser and more accurate to allow them to stay in tension.

First, is the Kingdom of God a reign or a realm? The New Testament teaching on the Kingdom of God points toward both. The Kingdom of God as the reign of God is supported by the ethical and spiritual nature of the Kingdom. Jesus tells Pilate that his Kingdom is “not of this world” (John 18:36). His parables teach that the Kingdom may be invisible unless one has God-given eyes to see. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount was so completely counter-intuitive to Jewish political expectations of their Messiah that an ethical and spiritual reign seems to be the focus. The political structures of this world are not anything like those of the Kingdom, where the first shall be last (Mark 10:42-45). Believers in Jesus Christ have already been transferred into the Kingdom of God’s beloved Son, even as they continue to live in the world with its many fallen political structures and realms (Col 1:13). But there are some teachings that cannot be spiritualized regarding the Kingdom. For example, one day all will eat and drink with Jesus in his Kingdom (Matt 26:29). In the book of Revelation, Christ has made the redeemed “a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (Rev 5:10). Finally, at the

consummation of all things, God will dwell with his people in a spatial environment in the new heavens and new earth (Rev 21).

The second set of themes that must be held in tension to remain true to the biblical teaching surround the question of “Is the Kingdom now or not yet?” Jesus announced that the Kingdom was “at hand” and had “come upon” his hearers (Mark 1:15; Luke 12:28). But the Kingdom is also spoken of as a future reality throughout the New Testament (Acts 1:6; Mark 10:17-31; etc.). Church history demonstrates the vacillating nature of answers to this question, moving from over-realized eschatology (the Kingdom is now) to an under-realized eschatology (the Kingdom is not yet).<sup>39</sup> The debates between classic dispensationalists and covenantal amillennialists often swung between these two extremes.<sup>40</sup> In this pendulum-swinging atmosphere, the work of Ladd brought much needed insight and correction. Though present in the writings of earlier theologians such as Adolf Schlatter,<sup>41</sup> Ladd’s presentation of the “now, but not yet” Kingdom brought inaugurated eschatology to the forefront of the evangelical consciousness. He suggested that the Kingdom had arrived already in the person of Jesus, but anticipated a future consummation in the millennial Kingdom and eternal state.<sup>42</sup>

Emerging church leaders, anxious to avoid reducing Christianity to a simplistic “go to heaven when you die” message with no earthly implications, often eliminate the tension by

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<sup>39</sup>A name typically associated with an overrealized eschatology is C. H. Dodd. Names typically associated with an underrealized eschatology are Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer. See France, “Kingdom of God,” 422.

<sup>40</sup>See Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 31-36. His analysis is extremely helpful and instructive.

<sup>41</sup>Adolf Schlatter, *The History of the Christ: The Foundation of New Testament Theology*, trans. Andreas J. Kostenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

<sup>42</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 54-132. See also Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*, 32.

placing the Kingdom in the present—and the present alone. That is, their Kingdom theology is overrealized. To be fair, not all Emerging church leaders distort the biblical testimony to the Kingdom. For example, Rick McKinley, the pastor of Imago Dei Community in Portland, Oregon, does a fine job in his book, *This Beautiful Mess*, of raising the red flag when we accept Jesus as savior, but reject him as King.<sup>43</sup>

### **The Gospel is Crucial to the Kingdom**

What many Emerging church leaders fail to realize is that the Kingdom is effected through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Revelation 5:5, 8-10 makes it clear that the cross of Christ was necessary for the fulfillment of the Kingdom agenda to be completed. The Davidic heir, the “Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David” is qualified to execute judgment precisely because he had “conquered,” through being “slain.” It was by his blood that he “ransomed people for God” and “made them a kingdom of priests to our God and they shall reign on the earth.” The language is sacrificial. He was worthy to receive “power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” because he “was slain” (Rev 5:12). In the Kingdom of God, sin and death must be dealt with before the Kingdom can come. Curses on humanity and the earth must be lifted before God can fully restore his reign in his place. Believers in the gospel have been delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Christ (Col 1:13). Those who are part of the Kingdom have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col 1:14). Far from derailing the Kingdom purposes of God, the cross of Christ makes the

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<sup>43</sup>Rick McKinley, *This Beautiful Mess: Practicing the Presence of the Kingdom of God* (Sisters: Multnomah Press, 2006), 38. McKinley defines the Kingdom this way: “The kingdom of God is the living, breathing presence and purpose and reign of God on our planet.” Ibid.

consummation of the Kingdom possible (cf. 2 Tim 2:8-13).<sup>44</sup>

Ray Anderson, in his book, *A Theology for the Emergent Church*, understands the cosmic implications of having a Kingdom centered theology. After quoting Colossians 1:15-17, he states, “This is kingdom language. An emergent theology with less than this cosmic vision lacks as much depth as it does height.”<sup>45</sup> He is absolutely right, but Colossians 1:18-19 includes strong atonement language which effects the cosmic reconciliation accomplished by God through Christ. Can you have the Kingdom without the cross?<sup>46</sup> Certain individuals in the Emerging church may wish to eschew traditional Christological categories, but both the person and work of Jesus are essential for the consummation of the Kingdom.

### **Ecclesiology is Crucial to the Kingdom**

Colossians 1:13-20 unites the themes of Kingdom, church, and atonement. The King of the kingdom is declared to be the “head of the body, the church.” It is through Jesus and his bloody work on the cross that “all things, whether on earth or in heaven” are reconciled to the Father. But what is the relationship of the church to the Kingdom? It must be stated emphatically that the church is not the Kingdom. But to follow many Emerging church leaders and shift our attention away from the church to a broad, undefined Kingdom is equally

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<sup>44</sup>See Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 81-129

<sup>45</sup>Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*, 102.

<sup>46</sup>Goldsworthy writes, “Eventually, when all evil is put down, the renewing process of redemption will result in the fullness of the kingdom of God. The OT story points towards this consummation, the gospel effects it.” Graeme Goldsworthy, “Kingdom of God,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 618. Rick McKinley, pastor of Imago Dei Community in Portland, Oregon writes, “I have told our story to many church leaders. The weird thing is that most of them smile and get excited and go home inspired, but nothing changes because they try to do kingdom stuff without desire for the King. In short, they never repented. Repenting turns us away from our own poverty and toward God’s best. His kingdom is here among us.” McKinley, *This Beautiful Mess*, 53.

misguided, as the first chapter of Colossians demonstrates.

For help in clarifying the relationship between the church and the Kingdom, we turn again to the work of Ladd.<sup>47</sup> The Church is a community of people who are bound to and serve the King whose ministry is to display the proleptic life of the eschatological Kingdom in the present evil age. It is clear that the Kingdom is never to be confused with the church. But there can never be a strict bifurcation between the two for the church is a community of the Kingdom. Further, because the Kingdom is the rule of God, manifest in the mission of Jesus, the Kingdom creates the church. As such, it is the task of the church to bear witness to the Kingdom.

Emerging church leaders are right to focus on the Kingdom, but when they focus on the Kingdom to the exclusion of the church, they effectively mute the voice of the God-ordained witness to the Kingdom. Just as importantly, as an instrument of the Kingdom, the same Kingdom power that worked through Jesus (Mat 4; 10:8; Luke 10:17) is available to the church. When Emerging church leaders call for solidarity around Kingdom values while simultaneously denying the centrality of the church in Christ's Kingdom strategy, they are rendering those committed to the Kingdom impotent in witnessing to the Kingdom by living lives characteristic of the Kingdom.

Ladd summarizes this way:

The Kingdom is God's reign and the realm in which the blessings of his reign are experienced; the church is the fellowship of those who have experienced God's reign and entered through the church, and is proclaimed in the world by the church. There can be no Kingdom without a church—those who have acknowledged God's rule—and there can be no church without God's Kingdom; but they remain two distinguishable concepts: the rule of God and the fellowship of men and women.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 103-117.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 117. It is interesting to note that many emergent leaders claim the influence of Ladd in their thinking on the Kingdom, but their theology of the Kingdom and of the church does not match Ladd's in the slightest.

## Analysis

The theological revisionism that has taken place regarding the nature of the gospel and ecclesiology has led to two specific areas of cultural engagement that are troubling. Both of these areas lean heavily on the Kingdom of God as an organizing principle. Both of these are theologically deficient due to their impoverished understanding of the Kingdom.

### **First Implication: The Social gospel**

The reduction of the gospel to “believe these propositions so you can go to heaven when you die” cannot be sustained in Scripture. Emerging church leaders are right to question such reduction. Jesus’ announcement and inauguration of the Kingdom and his giving of eternal life does have implications for life today. Emerging church leaders are right to affirm this. Further, in light of the inauguration of the Kingdom, the church is required to demonstrate compassion, care, and stewardship in the world, and Emerging church leaders are also right to call for such qualities today. But when the inaugurated Kingdom is reduced to a realized Kingdom (“here and now”),<sup>49</sup> then the motivation for, and ability to faithfully carry out, social action has to be called into question. McLaren’s understanding of the Beatitudes is illustrative of this. He writes that Jesus’ eight statements “tell what kinds of people . . . are well off, have ‘the good life,’ are fortunate and blessed.”<sup>50</sup> Note the present verb tense. Far from future realization, they have the good life and are blessed now. McLaren goes on, “So, Jesus says, if you want to live in the kingdom of God, you don’t seek to stir up lust and then prevent adultery, but rather you seek to deal with the root, the source. The kingdom of God calls you to desire and seek a

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<sup>49</sup>McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 118.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

genuinely pure heart.”<sup>51</sup> But there is no hint of regeneration or clue as to how to get the renewed heart. Ultimately, it seems to be a matter of self-determination. McLaren’s *The Secret Message of Jesus* is a deeply troubling work because the gospel cannot be found in it—and I’m not talking about a “go-to-heaven-when-you-die” message. The Holy Spirit is conspicuously absent from the book. The New Covenant is hardly mentioned, if at all. The human dilemma is one of laziness and bad education, rather than a heart that is fallen. At the end of the day, McLaren’s message is essentially a call for humanity to try to be like Jesus by pulling itself up by its own moral bootstraps.

Brian McLaren is not the only Emerging church leader guilty of postulating an overrealized Kingdom. As Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill in Grand Rapids, states, “The goal isn’t escaping this world but making this world the kind of place God can come to.”<sup>52</sup> The latest book produced by EmergentVillage, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, tackles such issues as women’s rights, sexuality, racial fragmentation, political and economic injustice with only fleeting reference to the gospel.<sup>53</sup> For some, the Kingdom is about advocating for mass transit.<sup>54</sup> Most of these are admirable causes, many of them are crucial. The book is high on the call to social action, but severely deficient on the gospel.

Any time the Kingdom of God is emphasized while simultaneously de-emphasizing

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 123.

<sup>52</sup>Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 150.

<sup>53</sup>Dan Kimball’s chapter entitled “Humble Theology: Re-exploring Doctrine while Holding on to Truth,” is one notable exception. offers a call to humble orthodoxy in his chapter. *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, 214-224.

<sup>54</sup>Brad Cecil of Axxess in Arlington, TX is working on bringing public transportation to Arlington. “We feel that it would be kingdom-like to allow people who live in this community to spend money on other things besides multiple vehicles. This is one way by which we want people to feel the presence of God in our community.” Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 147.

(or revisioning) both the church and the gospel, the impetus will be towards a non-redemptive and powerless social work.<sup>55</sup> How is this any different from the teaching of Walter Rauschenbusch, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century New York pastor, often referred to as the “Father of the Social Gospel?” He continually championed the kingdom of God. As Mark Noll describes, “Rauschenbusch had no room in his theology for the substitutionary atonement, a literal hell, or a literal second coming. He also encouraged a nearly utopian sense of human potential. . .”<sup>56</sup> The doctrinal commitments of Rauschenbusch are eerily similar to that of many in the Emerging church, including its most prominent spokespersons. I fear that history will demonstrate that Rauschenbusch was more orthodox in his affirmations than many who are carrying the banner for the Emerging church.

### **Second Implication: Inclusivism and Pluralism**

The emphasis upon the Kingdom in Emerging church theology, coupled with the revisioning of ecclesiology and the gospel, has significant soteriological implications. The impoverished understanding of the Kingdom allows many Emerging church leaders to embrace a radical soteriological inclusivism, and in many cases, even pluralism.<sup>57</sup> When the role of the church is diminished, if not ignored, in pursuing relationship with God, then spirituality can be

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<sup>55</sup>Again, not every Emerging church separates is guilty of this. Mark Palmer of Landing Place in Columbus OH wants to link social action with an intentional spirituality. “One cool thing we have done is to create the Urban Center for Spiritual formation. There we try to marry spiritual disciplines to social action. We experiment to do these two together. We have a desire to do spiritual practices and turn them into social action.” Ibid., 141.

<sup>56</sup>M. A. Noll, “Rauschenbusch, Walter,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984). 913.

<sup>57</sup>Again, this is not true of all Emerging church leaders. For example, Paul Roberts of Resonance in Bristol says, “A group of people who are merely reading Jesus together as one among a range of possible sources of inspiration for a shared life journey (or a slice of it) are different from a group of people trying to follow him as the Lord of their journey.” Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 122.

defined as “living in an interactive relationship with God and others as a daily way of life.”<sup>58</sup>

This leads many to think that the influence of Jesus is stronger outside of some religious institutions than inside.<sup>59</sup> In the minds of many Emerging church leaders, the Kingdom of God is bigger than Christianity.

McLaren uses his perceived inclusive nature of the Kingdom of God to interpret Gal 3:28 in the modern context as saying that reconciliation demands that “Christians with Jews and Muslims and Hindus” must live together in the kingdom.<sup>60</sup> Samir Selmanovic, pastor of Crosswalk church, and leader in Emergent Village, argues that:

The emergent church movement has come to believe that the ultimate context of the spiritual aspirations of a follower of Jesus Christ is not Christianity but rather the kingdom of God. This realization has many implications, and the one standing above all is the fact that, like every other religion, Christianity is a non-god, and every non-god can be an idol.<sup>61</sup>

According to Salmanovic, the Kingdom of God is “better than Christianity,” because it “supersedes Christianity in scope, depth and expression. . . . The Christian religion is still an entity in the human realm.”<sup>62</sup> With regard to the gospel, Salmanovic explains, “The gospel is not our gospel, but the gospel of the kingdom of God, and what belongs to the kingdom of God cannot be hijacked by Christianity. God is sovereign, like the wind. He blows wherever he

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<sup>58</sup>McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 83.

<sup>59</sup>McLaren repeatedly holds Gandhi up as one who understood the way of Jesus better than many Christians do.

<sup>60</sup>McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 99. There are limits to Brian McLaren’s inclusiveness. “For example, if we deny the Trinity or the full humanity and deity of Christ, I believe we have turned from the path.” Idem, “Seeking to Do One Thing Well: A Response to Three Helpful Reviews,” *Reformation and Revival Journal* 14:3 (2005), 123.

<sup>61</sup>Samir Selmanovic, “The Sweet Problem of Inclusiveness: Finding God in the Other,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, eds. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 192.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 194.

chooses.”<sup>63</sup> How does one recognize whether one is participating in the Kingdom? As with most forms of inclusivism and pluralism, the answer is ethical: “An emerging generation of Christians is simply saying, ‘No more special treatment. In the Scripture, God has established a criteria of truth, and it has to do with the fruits of a gracious life.’”<sup>64</sup> For many Emerging church leaders, the Kingdom also makes possible authentic interfaith dialogue and ministries. For example, Dave Sutton of New Duffryn Community Church in Newport, UK says, “My understanding is that if the kingdom is what God is about, then God might be involved in other faiths. . . . We very much see our work in relation to the unique person and work of Christ. If other religions are involved in that work, that is fine.”<sup>65</sup>

When Jesus Christ is reduced to a spokesperson and exemplar for Kingdom values, then he is effectively severed from his Kingdom as defined by the Bible. Russell Moore explains the centrality of Christ to the Kingdom well:

This is the key insight of inaugurated eschatology—namely, the fact that its central biblical referent is not a golden age within history or the timing of prophetic events, but instead is the One whom God has exalted as ‘both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified’ (Acts 2:36). The ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ aspects of the Kingdom find their content in the identity and mission of Jesus as Messiah. This correctly locates the hinge of history as resting on the incarnation, life, sacrificial death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus as the harbinger of the ‘last days’ (Heb 1:2), the ‘firstborn’ of the eschatological resurrection of

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid. Salmonovic explains, “My friend Mark from New York serves Jesus in substance rather than in words, living out a wordless faith in God. This is only to say that there are no indications in the Bible that this dynamic applies only to individuals and not to groups. Religions live under the spiritual laws of the kingdom of God.” Ibid., 195.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 195. Strangely, Selmanovic prooftexts John 15 and 17 in an attempt to make his point.

<sup>65</sup>Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 133. Pete Rollins of ikon in Belfast, UK says, “We deemphasize the idea that Christians have God and all others don’t by attempting to engage in open two-way conversations. This does not mean we have lapsed into relativism, as we still believe in the uniqueness of our own tradition, but we believe that it teaches us to be open to all. We are also genuinely open to being wrong about parts and perhaps all our beliefs—while at the same time being fully committed to them.” Ibid., 132. Spencer Burke, creator of TheOOZE.com of Newport Beach, CA pushes the boundaries into interfaith practices by participating in a Buddhist service as a church, with a guided meditation. He recognizes that the Spirit has been with these people. They reach out to other traditions. Ibid., 132.

the righteous (Col 1:18), and the Kingdom of God in person.<sup>66</sup>

A Kingdom with no King ultimately is reduced to an ethical Kingdom of human effort. This articulation may rest easy on postmodern sensibilities, but it is not reflective of the biblical story. Many Emerging church leaders have embraced a fallacious view of the Kingdom and it has led them straight down the road through inclusivism to pluralism.

### **The King of the Kingdom**

This brief study has exposed two critical errors that are possible when the relationship between Jesus Christ the King and his Kingdom is denied. The first error is the proclamation of the King without any reference to his Kingdom. This occurs in practice when the church reduces the gospel to concern for eternal destiny with little care for the current well-being of others. Many Evangelicals have reacted so strongly against the theologically emptiness of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century social gospel, that they looked with suspicion at any social work whatsoever. After all, what is important is the eternal destiny of a person. What shall it profit a man if he develop a system for sterilizing water but lose his soul. What shall it profit a child if he be immunized against disease, but lose his soul. What shall it profit a woman if she be taught well-baby care but lose her soul. The gospel was reduced to a matter of go-to-heaven-when-you-die, with no implications for this life whatsoever. The question is, what does such a message have in common with the teaching of Jesus? Proclaiming a King without the Kingdom is contrary to the biblical witness and a perversion of the gospel. Those in the Emerging church are right to bring criticism against such practices.

But neither can we proclaim the Kingdom without the King. We do this when we

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<sup>66</sup>Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*, 56.

refuse to identify ourselves with Christ when we serve. When we serve for the advancement of the Kingdom while not proclaiming the King who makes the Kingdom possible, we are in effect denying the King of the Kingdom—making Kingdom advancement a matter of human decision and achievement. This is seductively easy to do in our age of religious pluralism. Making claims about the exclusivity of Christ has always been offensive, but it is especially odious to postmodern sensibilities. People want the Kingdom and all that goes with it. It is with the King of the Kingdom that people struggle. Therefore, we must be faithful to proclaim both the King and the Kingdom.

The irony of this entire project is that the Kingdom impulse of the Emerging church is correct and ought to be affirmed, but their impoverished and distorted theology of the Kingdom cannot deliver what they want. At the end, I fear their efforts will devolve to a social gospel not unlike the failed efforts of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century liberalism. A fully developed biblical theology of the Kingdom, however, would serve to ground and sustain their efforts.

A biblical Kingdom theology can support environmental concerns because the entire cosmos belongs to the King of the Kingdom, who will one day reign here in his realm. A biblical Kingdom theology can support concern for the poor and hungry because in the Kingdom of Christ, people do not go hungry. A biblical Kingdom theology can support relief for those socially oppressed because there is no place for injustice in a Kingdom ruled by our good and compassionate Christ. According to a biblical Kingdom theology, the consummation of the Kingdom does not rest on impotent human effort and fallen human design because in the Kingdom of Christ, hearts are regenerated and Kingdom citizens are indwelt and empowered by the Spirit of the King. Finally, the consummation of such a Kingdom is not a mere hope or dream as some Emerging leaders prefer to call it, because the King of the Kingdom, Jesus Christ

our risen Lord, has conquered sin and death and now sits at the right hand of God the Father; his return, far from a dream, is a certain future reality.

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