

## **Jesus Comes Describing the Kingdom**

**By Bob Young**

**[in part edited from McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*]**

The first time I remember encountering the idea was in reading Woodruff and Payne's *Struggles of the Kingdom*: The seed for sowing the kingdom is found in the gospels. I plead guilty, across almost 50 years of ministry, to having spent far too much time trying to define the kingdom on the basis of the teaching materials in the letters rather than the preaching and promises of Jesus. More recently, I have been challenged by numerous books that put more focus on Jesus' teachings, including McLaren's *The Secret Message of Jesus* (through multiple readings). Why have we had so little interest in what Jesus says about the kingdom? Have we too easily rejected the Sermon on the Mount and the Gospels as pre-Pentecost and therefore not on an equal footing with the "real" New Testament—Acts and following? Is Jesus not setting forth a kingdom agenda when he introduces his ministry—in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount or Luke's synagogue encounter (chapter 4)?

Some may ask, "Why do you continue to grapple with things that many consider settled? Why are you not content with what has already been written about the church and the kingdom?" Perhaps it is that I am still on a search, a spiritual quest. I see two extremes among Christians: some people think Jesus and the kingdom will always be a mystery and can never be figured out; others think they have Jesus, his message and his mission, already figured out and there is little else to be learned—at least nothing of much significance. The latter group often tends to define Christianity in formulas; the former sees little value in understanding Jesus' message or the Bible since religion is supposed to be mysterious, experiential, emotional, and beyond understanding.

Between these two extremes I see wonderful possibilities. I meet people who define themselves as spiritual but not religious; I see people who never go to church but avidly read or watch documentaries about Jesus and the Bible story hoping to gain a deeper understanding of the significance of Jesus and his story. I talk to those who believe Jesus holds the greatest hope and possibility for our future, wanting to believe but rejecting traditional approaches; some of these even call themselves Christians. I believe others are on a journey not unlike mine. I write to clarify for myself what I see. I share because others may be blessed.

### **What does Jesus say about the kingdom?**

If we think we can distill Jesus' teachings about the kingdom and the new people of God into a single paragraph or brief answer, we have not yet "gotten it." I look around at multiple churches, I hear varied and conflicting truth claims; I see various expressions of Christianity. What if Jesus' teachings have been unintentionally misunderstood, or even worse, intentionally distorted? What if we are missing the core? What if the vast dimensions of Jesus' purpose are still beyond us? How serious are we about understanding Jesus' teachings? Are we willing to search, think, analyze, and challenge current thoughts and assumptions?

In analyzing what Jesus says, McLaren observes that some of his words are spoken in the public arena while others are spoken privately to his followers or to certain individuals. In some Bibles, the words of Jesus are printed in red letters. What happens if we read the Gospels and focus specifically on the red letters—the words of Jesus? What do we see? What can we learn? A number of individual, private conversations of Jesus' are in John's Gospel—Nicodemus, the woman at the well, a lame man, a blind man, Mary and Martha. Also in John's Gospel, one finds private conversations of Jesus with his disciples. John includes some of what Jesus spoke in public—but Jesus' public teachings are more

numerous in the other Gospels, especially the extended discourses of Matthew's Gospel: the Sermon on the Mount (5-7), the parables (13), forgiveness (18), and 24-25.

Jesus teaches several things about the kingdom. He says the kingdom has come (Mark 1:13) and urges repentance and faith. (Note that what Jesus says does not match the common formula where faith precedes repentance.) Jesus says that unless you rethink life and reorient yourself in this world, faith is impossible. In a different context, he says the kingdom is among you (Luke 17). His message grates on Jewish ears. Jesus comes as a prophet, just as John the Baptist. God's prophets, unlike the formal religious leaders among the Jews, were largely without credentials. When they had credentials (like Jeremiah and Ezekiel) their outrageous behaviors and messages called into question their qualifications. Jesus describes the kingdom in parables. Jesus comes with a message just as difficult to accept as that of his forerunners. McLaren says it appears Jesus was purposefully metaphorical, intentionally jarring, and disruptive as he denounced religious greed, exclusion, and hypocrisy.

Jesus' description of the kingdom contains several elements. The kingdom Jesus describes produces a new reality. It is inclusionary, for everyone; normal distinctions are discarded. The first are last, the last are first. Human values are discarded—"it will not be so among you." Former priorities, the search for prestige, position, and prominence are no more. Kingdom people give attention to the least among them (Matt. 5, 25). Sinners who buy into the new way of thinking can be accepted, even welcomed. The kingdom includes the outcasts, the poor, and those who have little or no value according to society's standards. The disadvantaged of the world are served by offering them full inclusion in the new kingdom realities. Not only are these included, they are embraced and valued; they are brought into full fellowship because they share full faith in the new kingdom order. Read Jesus carefully: he has little patience with people who readily accept the handout but have little interest in rethinking and reforming their lives as fully engaged participants in the kingdom (John 6). No one has the option of wanting physical needs met and rejecting the spiritual realities.

Life in the kingdom is demanding. While all are welcome, sincerity of heart is essential. Mere outward conformity will not suffice. Outward faithfulness must match inward faith. Jesus has no patience with injustice and hypocrisy, taking advantage of others—it matters not whether one is looking up the societal value ladder or down the ladder. All are expected to treat others with justice; none should be unfairly burdened (2 Cor. 8).

The kingdom is present; the kingdom is possible now. Jesus describes the kingdom of God as a present or soon to come reality. The normal response, then as now, is disbelief. The kingdom of God cannot really be present—God cannot be in control—because of multiplied external, opposing circumstances. Look at the world. The kingdom of God cannot be a reality in this mess. In Jesus' day, the kingdom was thought to be impossible because of Roman occupation and rulers who opposed Christianity. The common thinking was that the kingdom of God's rule required a sympathetic government. Many Jews thought the Messiah would provide new government, military might to liberate, or new standards that would reform a hostile society. Our situation today is little different. We also are inclined to deny the full presence of the kingdom because of the imperfect world about us. But Jesus describes a kingdom that does not depend on external realities but internal re-creation.

What should we make of Jesus' words about the kingdom? How should we integrate them into the historical narrative of Acts and the teachings of the letters? Thinking of Jesus' message about the kingdom, two questions echo across Jesus' teachings and ministry and extend also into the life of the early church. What does it mean to proclaim the message of the kingdom; how should we talk about and share the kingdom? And, how should we live out the kingdom message? Those are worthy of much attention and prayer for all who honestly and whole-heartedly seek to be Christians and to be part of the kingdom.