

R E G G I E M C N E A L

*Why We Must Give Up Our Obsession with Fixing
the Church—and What We Should Do Instead*

KINGDOM COME

Reggie McNeal combines southern charm with gospel disruption. Just like the Jesus he follows, McNeal realigns God's people with news of the Kingdom. This means everything gets reordered for the sake of God's determination "to make all things new." McNeal continues to point skillfully and faithfully to God's essentials and priorities, which recast church and life in Kingdom terms.

DR. MARK LABBERTON

President, Fuller Theological Seminary

In *Kingdom Come*, Reggie McNeal masterfully does what we've come to expect of him: intersecting the path of our past with the reality of the present in order to guide and challenge us toward a new and better direction for the future. Why listen to him? He looks out the window, sees what most of us are too busy to see, and challenges us to new thinking.

TODD WILSON

Cofounder and director, Exponential

Reggie McNeal has written an exuberant, humble, clear, timely, nearly unassailable call-to-arms for Jesus followers to radically shift their focus from Churchianity to the Kingdom of God—*life as God intends it*. We must rediscover our essential task as partners in God's redemptive mission for the world, or lose our claim to relevance in a culture that is quickly abandoning propositional Christianity that has been hermetically sealed in competitive silos of shrinking market share. Breaking free from brittle, self-imposed constraints, Reggie calls us to join hands and hearts in the common purpose of loving God by loving our neighbors in as many life-honoring ways as health and wholeness reveal.

THE REV. DR. STEPHEN BAUMAN

Christ Church, United Methodist, New York City

Kudos to Reggie McNeal, who is out to return us from Churchianity to Christianity. Read this book to understand that the church is not a club, but a launching pad; that discipleship's about a direction (following Jesus), not a doctrine; and that the gospel story's star is God, not your church. May *Kingdom Come* help us recalibrate so that we may live out the Abrahamic call to bless our cities and the nations.

DR. AMY L. SHERMAN

Author of *Kingdom Calling*

I appreciated reading Reggie McNeal's *Kingdom Come*. As usual with this author, I felt alternately affirmed, challenged, and occasionally bothered by his candid insights on the church and contemporary culture. It reads like a manifesto for mission, calling for Christian leaders to seriously consider the true Kingdom impact their ministry is having on the community they are called to serve.

BARRY SWANSON

Commissioner of the Eastern Territory, Salvation Army USA

Reggie gives us a compelling thesis on unlocking the congregation's social power from within today's churches. He offers a blueprint for building greater Kingdom communities, where congregations find spiritual fulfillment in Kingdom service. Imagine the strength of church foundations built on the rocks of its people's collaborative spirit and on mission work with and for the community. The Kingdom can come, and never has the need been greater.

SAM OLIVER

Global supply chain production lead, Monsanto

Are we, as the church, supposed to get our hands dirty in the pressing issues of our communities? If the Kingdom is essentially "life as God intends for it to be," as Reggie McNeal contends so convincingly in this book, and if we see that our community is not as God intends, then we have our answer. In that light, the church is no longer the end; it is the means.

JIM MORGAN

President, Meet the Need

Our missional coach is back to his meddling business. Reggie makes a biblical case that if congregations are going to be involved in what God is up to, they must move from their predictable church ministry focus to a Kingdom mission focus. Churches may be dying, but God's Kingdom is thriving. This book has the potential, with the Spirit's help, to wake us up from "missional amnesia" and launch us into vital, life-giving mission.

DR. MARNIE CRUMPLER

Executive pastor, Peachtree Presbyterian Church

Kingdom Come can transform our country's education system! Reggie McNeal inspires Kingdom growth in our schools and communities with examples of people who are partnering with God and their local schools. Classroom teachers alone cannot meet the educational, health, and social needs of all children. It takes a Kingdom approach. Practical and stirring advice on how to be *on mission* with God with issues that stir your heart.

MELANIE BARTON

Executive director, South Carolina Education Oversight Committee

One of the first songs my children learned was "Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God." I admit I never was sure exactly what that meant until now. Open this book, underline every word, and as God's people, partner with Him in helping people live a better life—abundant life! May His Kingdom come!

JUDY LEE

Executive director, Titus County Cares



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INTRODUCTION

I WAS THE GUEST SPEAKER AT a Lutheran church on Reformation Sunday, a high holy day for this denominational tribe that feels a special connection to the Reformation. This particular congregation had pulled out all the stops—literally. Their pipe organ was at full throttle. The choirs sang, the handbell ringers rang, the orchestra swelled, and all the banners were unfurled. It was great pageantry, and I loved every minute of it.

My assignment that morning was to challenge the church to move forward into the future. After acknowledging the historical significance of Martin Luther in the progression of Christianity, I turned my comments to the church's next chapter.

“We’ve been working at ‘fixing’ the church for the past five hundred years,” I said. “How’s that going for us?”

I reflected on the fact that, in my lifetime alone, we’ve been through the personal evangelism movement, the church renewal movement, the church growth movement, the worship wars, the church health craze, and the charismatic and

neo-charismatic doctrinal debates (just to name a few of the topics that have captured the attention of church leaders). After sharing some current statistics about the growing disaffection of Americans with institutional religion, I proposed an alternative approach: “Why not just do what the church *should* be doing—partnering with God in his redemptive mission in the world—and let the overflow of that effort bring about the renewal we’re looking for?”

Put another way, it’s time for a change in the narrative we’re using to express the identity and mission of the church. Obsessing over “fixing the church” has created a church-centered storyline that not only misses the point but also often runs counter to the narrative that God intends for us to live into and out of—namely, the saga of the Kingdom of God. It’s time for the church to get over its self-absorption and self-centeredness and adopt the larger and more compelling story of God’s Kingdom as its reason for being and its mission in the world.

The problem is that we don’t see the problem with these competing narratives. That’s because too many church people confuse the two storylines. From what I’ve observed, most Christians seem to believe that the *church* and the *Kingdom* of God are one and the same—that is, if they’ve even studied or been taught about the Kingdom (which I know from my own experience growing up is not a given).

In any case, there’s a widely held set of beliefs among churchgoers that (1) God’s primary agenda on earth focuses on building the church; (2) what happens on Sunday mornings largely defines the mission and ministry of the church; and (3) if people aren’t going to church on Sunday,

then something is terribly messed up with the pursuit of God's agenda.

In the context of these beliefs, the growing cultural disaffection with the institutional church is a pretty discouraging situation. A 2012 Pew Study of Religion in America showed that one in five Americans now claim "nonaffiliated" as their religious identification—up from one in six in 2007. For the Millennial generation, that number is almost one in three (32 percent)—up from one in four just five years earlier!

Certainly, if we believe that the church as a cultural institution is at the center of God's work in the world, it's an alarming trend. But if we recognize that it is actually the Kingdom of Heaven that is at the center of God's plan and purpose, well, the church occupies a much stronger position.

Potentially.

If we get our story straight.

A better future for the church requires that we realign our theology and practice with the primary storyline of the Kingdom.

Let's see if we can untangle the competing storylines.

The word *church* appears only three times in most modern English translations of the Gospels (once in Matthew 16:18 and twice in Matthew 18:17). In each instance, the underlying Greek word is *ekklesia*, which was a familiar word in the first century that referred not to a place or a program but to an *assembly of people*. Specifically, these were people "called out" from among the community to serve the town or village by looking after its welfare—a kind of eldership. This word that connotes "a stewardship of community life" is the one that Jesus chose to designate his followers. By definition,

the church (*ekklesia*) was never supposed to focus on itself. The interests and issues of the *community* were the rightful scope of its agenda.

In comparison, the Gospels contain thirty-one references to the Kingdom of Heaven (all in Matthew) and fifty-one mentions of the Kingdom of God (throughout all four Gospels). In teaching his disciples, Jesus focused far more on the *Kingdom* than on the *assembly*.

Surely this emphasis gives us a clue about what captures the heart of God. Jesus also talked a lot about how we treat one another, especially when it comes to the poor and disadvantaged. He called us to a life of meeting the needs of others and alleviating the suffering and pain that is naturally part of living in a broken world.

To drive home his point, Jesus healed people of disease, dysfunction, and disfigurement to show us the Kingdom in action and to demonstrate God's intention to redeem human existence in every dimension—physical, emotional, and spiritual. And when he taught his followers to pray, he made it clear that the priority of the Kingdom of Heaven is to manifest itself on earth—not just by and by, but here and now! In other words, Jesus wants us to pray for, deeply desire, and dedicate ourselves to seeing the Kingdom as it operates in heaven made *visible* and *active* in our daily experience here on earth.

Still, it has been difficult for many churchgoers in our society to get a handle on the Kingdom. Our classic definitions, such as “the rule and reign of God,” make it seem a distant and fuzzy reality. We know that Jesus taught his disciples to pray that God's Kingdom would come and that

his will would be done “on earth as it is in heaven,” but we’ve had trouble translating these concepts into real-time, real-life applications.

The Kingdom champions the life that God intends for all of us to experience on *this* planet, in *this* lifetime. This epic adventure is worthy of our lives because it is the story of life as God has always intended—where good triumphs over evil and light chases away darkness. God’s perfect plan will not be fully realized until Jesus returns, but in the meantime he wants us to pray that the Kingdom will break *in* to our hearts, bringing transformation to our lives, and break *out* into the world, bringing hope amid hurt and fostering a better world in the face of immense problems, as we refuse to allow evil and suffering to have the final word in our lives. Talk about a compelling story!

At the end of a lengthy teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew 13, Jesus says to his disciples, “Every teacher of the law *who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven* is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old” (Matthew 13:52, NIV, emphasis added). Whatever else we might glean from this verse, I believe two points are clear:

1. Jesus draws a distinction between teachers who have become disciples in the Kingdom of Heaven and ones who have not.
2. Those teachers who have become disciples in the Kingdom of Heaven don’t abandon the “old” treasures, but they bring out “new treasures as well.”

My desire in these pages is to unpack some of the treasures that have been hidden or buried and whose time to be “brought out of the storeroom” is long overdue. As we’ll see, they’ve been hiding in plain sight all along.

I believe that God is looking for pastors, leaders, and individual Jesus-followers who are willing to become disciples in the Kingdom of Heaven and thereby further the Kingdom agenda here on earth. The Kingdom has always been operating, but the question is whether we in the church will align ourselves with Kingdom priorities and Kingdom purposes and allow the Kingdom to focus and guide our lives.

The key to unleashing the promise of the Kingdom does not lie in our figuring out how to “do church better.” We have great bands, laser light shows, amazing health clubs, incredible worship extravaganzas, engaging sermons, and good coffee—finally! In other words, we do church fabulously well. Obsessing over this issue is an unworthy and unbiblical, even idolatrous, pursuit. Instead, the church must embrace and embody a new narrative driven by Kingdom concerns instead of church issues.

Background Information

Before we can change our cultural narrative for the better, the church must change its own internal narrative. For starters, we must recognize that the church and the Kingdom are not one and the same. We must draw some key distinctions if we want to see things in their proper perspective. Here are just a few examples to show you what I mean:

1. The church's role as a vital force in society is increasingly in question. The Kingdom of Heaven, on the other hand, is never irrelevant. God's plan and purpose in the world are always cutting edge because the Kingdom is all about bringing healing to the afflicted, binding up the brokenhearted, releasing people from captivity, and redeeming everything diminished by sin.

If church leaders would unbundle the social capital in their organizations to join God in his Kingdom work, many communities across North America would experience a significant improvement in the quality of people's lives. Aligning the church with the Kingdom will both serve the community and save the church from missional irrelevance.

2. The church, as commonly configured, is often centered on activities among church people on church property for church purposes, and can become focused on preserving and perpetuating the program. In contrast, the Kingdom of Heaven is an *invading force*, expanding the rule and reign of God against a dark kingdom that will inevitably collapse. God invites us to participate in his liberation campaign, but the Kingdom moves forward whether we choose to participate or not. If we opt out, we will miss the abundant life that God has in mind for us. But if we respond to Jesus' call to live as Kingdom agents *everywhere we go*, we will experience the joy of seeing God at work. Once

you've witnessed a few resurrections, everything else pales in comparison!

3. The current scorecard by which many churches in North America measure their progress and success does not adequately reflect Kingdom values or the Kingdom agenda. What is considered important (as seen by what they measure) often reinforces a narrative at odds with the Kingdom of God.

Millions of well-meaning Jesus-followers have been led to believe that their primary spiritual identity is their church affiliation and that their devotion to God is measured by church-centered metrics such as participation in, and support of, church activities.

If these efforts contributed to the advance of the Kingdom, that would be one thing. But the sad truth is that much of the activity in the church actually *hinders* Kingdom expression by gobbling up time, talent, and treasure to support, maintain, and perpetuate church programs.

4. In a Kingdom-centered understanding of the church, the gathering of like-minded believers doesn't go away. In fact, it becomes even more essential for worship, encouragement, instruction, and fellowship. But those activities won't be seen as ends in themselves, and success will not be defined by the size of the gathering, the sublimity of the sermon, or the "sense of God's presence" on a given Sunday. The church is not the point of the Kingdom; the Kingdom is the point of the church. Jesus taught us to pray "thy Kingdom

come,” not “thy church come.” The church is a subset of Kingdom activity. The Kingdom is not a subset of church activity. The Kingdom has a much more expansive mission than can be expressed through the institutional church. The Kingdom agenda involves every single aspect of God’s work in the world. By definition, most of what God does happens outside the church. The church has a vital role to play, but the church is not the center of the action.

5. Too often, the church has made “being saved” the point. Certainly, we have been saved from the penalty of sin through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, but the story doesn’t end there. We’ve not only been saved *from* something; we’ve also been saved *for* something, and that something is the work of the Kingdom. When we discover this and give our lives to it, we’ll begin to see the full story unfold.
6. The church is not eternal, but the Kingdom of God is. God’s purpose and plan predate the church and will play out beyond the reaches of human history. God’s mission was already underway in the Garden of Eden, and it will reach its fulfillment after the church has accomplished its work and has been folded into the eternal Kingdom.

Can We Talk?

From the responses I’ve received to a few of my previous books, I know some people think that I believe the institutional church has little role in the Kingdom and that

I'm allergic to any kind of organized religious expression. Nothing could be further from the truth. Both my theology and my personal practice involve the assembling of the body of Christ. Let me be clear: There is no such thing as privatized spirituality for Jesus-followers. After all, we have Trinitarian DNA in our blood!

Others have suggested that my observations—and, yes, my critiques of current church practice—merely serve up more deconstructive criticism. That's why I have gone to great lengths in this book to build my case from scriptural and theological foundations, as well as to offer alternative behaviors and practices in the hope of moving the discussion forward. In other words, I'm not interested in tearing down the church. I want to help it genuinely flourish by regaining its proper identity and role. Wherever we may disagree in the pages to follow, I hope we can be of one mind on this central idea: *The purpose of the church is to further God's Kingdom*. If we can agree on that, I believe we can find enough room to come together and talk.

Speaking to pastors and other church leaders in particular, I hope you will feel challenged, not attacked; inspired, not besieged; and supported, not undermined. As teachers and shepherds, you have an indispensable role to play in the Kingdom narrative. My hope is that, as a result of your courageous leadership, a Kingdom-centered agenda will begin to crowd out church-centered activity—not to push the church to the margins but to nudge it toward its proper place in the Kingdom.

We can be encouraged by the good news that the Kingdom of Heaven is doing just fine. It is ever-present, ever-working,

and ever-expanding. When I said this recently to a group of about five dozen pastors, they looked confused, as if it had never occurred to them that the Kingdom of God is not at risk. I told them all to relax, that God is quite capable of managing his own Kingdom and doesn't need our help to get his work done or to advance his position (which isn't to say that he does not make use of us in these ways).

My urgency in writing and speaking on this topic is not rooted in the fear that the Kingdom will suffer unless we somehow “get it” and do it right. My urgency is rooted in the desire that we *not miss out* on being a part of what God is *already* doing in the world. My hope is that the church will change its story and align with God's mission, and that we'll begin to see the Kingdom breaking out all over.

Many church leaders and Jesus-followers already get this message and are working like crazy to share and embody the Kingdom story. I work with a growing cadre of Kingdom agents—individual Jesus-followers, leaders of congregations and church networks, and teams of cross-domain community members and leaders. Some of them have been at it for years. Some are just getting their feet wet. They all are doing incredible work to move the needle on big societal issues—Kingdom issues—from tackling poverty to improving education, from expanding health-care access to fostering economic development. If it involves raising the quality of life (an important aspect of the “abundant life” that Jesus spoke of) for people made in the image of God, they are all in.

Consider this book your invitation to *get in the game* if you're not already, or an encouragement to *press on* if the Kingdom has already become your primary work and focus.

KINGDOM COME

Jesus has always had plans for the church. He still does. But his plans do not center on the church. His designs for us involve a much bigger story, maybe a different one than what you've heard about at church on Sunday.

That was certainly true for me.

MY JOURNEY INTO THE KINGDOM

I WAS A CHURCH PERSON before I was even born, attending services in my mother's womb for nine months before showing up to claim my spot in the church nursery. My dad was a Southern Baptist pastor, and my early spiritual life revolved around the church. I made my profession of faith when I was nine years old, walking the aisle during the hymn of invitation to publicly declare that Jesus was my Savior and Lord. By that same action, I also joined the church as a member, and I was baptized some weeks later as the culmination of that process. My baptism was celebrated as a church ordinance, took place in a church sanctuary, and was witnessed by a roomful of church people. It was a full-on church experience, signifying that I was now officially one of them.

The Kingdom of God was never mentioned during this pivotal time in my life. I didn't have the foggiest notion about the Kingdom or what part it played in my connection with God. For me, and for everyone I knew, it was all about the church. We demonstrated our Christian commitment by being good church members.

At some point, news of the Kingdom of God penetrated my consciousness, but it was viewed through the lens of church culture, leading (I now see) to a skewed understanding of the Kingdom and its place in God's plan for the world. The Kingdom was seen as a subset of church activity—more of a catchphrase to describe extraordinary church activities—rather than the main purpose for God's work in the world. So, for example, if two congregations came together to do some church thing—such as a youth fellowship event after a football game—that cooperative effort was called a Kingdom endeavor. The Kingdom was like the church on steroids—at least, that's how I understood it.

Later, as my denomination got caught up in the culture wars undertaken by conservative evangelical church leaders, the Kingdom designation was extended to include efforts by which the church sought to influence the political arena. Thus, crusades against various evils, certain leaders, and high-profile Supreme Court decisions were deemed Kingdom engagements. The clear belief was that the Kingdom of God was under assault and that it was up to us in the church to protect it and save it.

Because the church and the Kingdom were synonymous according to this paradigm, anything that threatened the church or diminished the role of the church in society was

seen as a direct assault on the Kingdom. We didn't have to look very far to find evidence of Kingdom erosion. Blue laws were collapsing, church attendance was waning, and countless other distractions were tearing at Christendom's hold on the culture.

Unfortunately, the church's budding siege mentality served to further its inward-turning self-absorption. The church-growth movement among evangelical Protestants and the Second Vatican Council in the Catholic Church were touted as efforts to connect with contemporary culture. But in reality those initiatives were driven by institutional concerns for survival. The rise of megachurches in the latter decades of the twentieth century—and the sense of growth and progress generated by shifting church attendance from the “mom and pop” churches to the “superstores”—masked the decline of Christendom and the church's influence in the culture.

Because *church* and *Kingdom* were seen as interchangeable terms for the same spiritual reality, things weren't looking too good for the home team. And, in fact, that “home team” mentality was part of the problem. We thought of ourselves as playing out the Kingdom game on our home turf, the church. As Sunday went, so went the Kingdom. Our church-centered scorecards celebrated church activities on church property led by church people for other church people. Everything else—vocations, hobbies, the rest of life outside the church—wasn't Kingdom related. Simply put, if it didn't show up at church, it didn't count. The perceived line between what was spiritual and what was merely secular was firmly drawn.

I began my preparation to go into ministry just as the church-growth movement was taking off and the seeker-friendly model was being formulated. The evolving conversation about ways to “reach the lost world” at least acknowledged that a world requiring some intentional engagement existed “out there.” But my thinking, along with that of most other church leaders at the time, was still very much centered on the church and its activities. The work of God in the world was anchored in the church and played out in the church. The aim was to get people into church, where God could somehow get ahold of them. And the church would grow if it was doing the right things.

Then, late in my seminary sojourn, I read some books that really messed up my view of the church. Beginning with Howard Snyder’s *The Problem of Wineskins* and *The Community of the King*, I came face-to-face with a radical, new (to me) idea—namely, that the key to church renewal lies in anchoring the mission and purpose of the church in the biblical teaching of what it means to be the people of God.

These books were the first I had encountered that highlighted the discussion of the church’s mission in the world. (Most books I was reading at the time dealt with some aspect of “doing church better”—improving existing practices without asking questions about why we were doing things the way we were or whether we should be doing them in the first place.) Snyder’s observations and critiques unsettled me, especially when he pointed out how much Jesus struggled with the religious institutions of *his* day.

I had grown up with a Jesus who loved the church, every single part of it, from the organ prelude to the Vacation

Bible School pledges of allegiance to the American flag, the Christian flag, and the Bible. (I can still recite them all.) The idea that Jesus might not be thrilled with church as I knew it was a stunning revelation and a real wake-up call.

Snyder's books were game changers, beginning a process that has now continued for more than three decades. The journey has involved moving from a church-centered universe to a Kingdom-centered framework, and it has shifted the center of gravity for how I see the world, how I view the work of God in the world, and how I relate to both.

Other writers soon chimed in on the conversation. Some were contemporary; others were ancient. I had done my doctoral work in historical theology, so I began to explore primary sources: the ante-Nicene church fathers, the sixteenth-century Reformers, and leaders of church renewal efforts throughout Christian history. These writers and their ideas expanded my understanding of how the church should express itself. I confess that my ideas were still church-centered rather than Kingdom-centered. I thought if we could just *fix* the church, the Kingdom of God would naturally be released. But I still thought our expression of the Kingdom would primarily be demonstrated through the congregational life and programs of the local church.

As a young church planter after seminary, I was determined to “do church differently,” so that it would be more of what God had in mind. However, I still reduced the scope and reach of the Kingdom down to church size as I plotted our congregationally focused ministry. I was convinced that building a great church was our contribution to God's Kingdom. We offered lots of innovative programming—and

we did it well—but it was all tethered to the church’s facilities. Church people planned, produced, and promoted our activities and programs, which were geared primarily for other church people to consume.

And then it was all taken away. After twenty years of local congregational ministry, I shifted venues to take on a role as a denominational executive and leadership coach. It proved a very challenging transition for my family and me. I loved the part about working with church leaders in their personal development; but I despised the denominational politics, and I couldn’t figure out why God would reassign me to something so unappealing. The only clue I had about the repositioning came through something I sensed God saying to me during a personal prayer retreat: *There’s someplace you can’t get to from where you are.*

For a long time, that was all I had to go on, but now I think I understand. There was a *universe* I couldn’t get to from where I was.

A Missional World Dawns

I vividly remember the moment when the shift began. It was like the crackling of ice on a pond in the springtime, which signaled the eventual collapse of the theological and philosophical platform that had supported my entire ministry to that point.

After speaking one day about the future of the church to a group of church leaders in another part of the state, I got in my car and drove home. Late that night, I pulled into the parking lot of the apartment complex where my family and I lived during the transition to my new job. I shut off the

engine and began contemplating the thirty-two-step climb to my third-floor apartment.

In the next few moments, before I even got out of the car, I had an unexpected but life-altering thought. It was more of a confession than an insight: *I just spent the past ten years of my life building the perfect church . . . and not a single person in this apartment complex would walk across the street to attend it.*

It was the truth! I had noticed that my family and I were the only ones leaving our apartment community on Sunday morning all dressed up and headed to church. Everyone else was sleeping in, enjoying the pool, or heading to the lake or the mall, and church was nowhere on their list of possible things to do.

What's wrong with this picture? If the church represents the manifest presence of God in the world—the very body of Christ—why was the culture losing interest in it, and why was so much church activity resulting in so little impact?

I spent the better part of the next decade working on this puzzle.

Over time, I came to believe that the church, particularly in North America, suffers from missional amnesia. When the church decided that the mission was about growing the church, doing church better, or even fixing the church, it went off mission, and became misguided, even idolatrous.

The answers I formulated led me to become a champion of the Kingdom and to try to shape the conversation around *missional church*—a term that should be redundant, but unfortunately is not.

The right answer to the question, *What constitutes the mission of the church?* has to do with partnering with God as

his people in *his* mission. That mission is the Kingdom of God, not the church.

Jesus told us to pray, “Thy Kingdom come,” not “Thy church come.” Though the church plays a vital role in the Kingdom, it is not the *point* of the Kingdom.

The purpose, goal, and result of the Kingdom is *life*, not church-centered metrics and outcomes. Jesus said, “I have come to give you abundant *life*,” not abundant *church*. Moreover, the church is not forever; the Kingdom is.

Those of us in the missional church conversation have made the case for a very different understanding of the church. This perspective (a more biblical perspective, we believe) offers a corrective to the consumerist, preoccupied, and self-absorbed expressions of church that, among other consequences, have given the church a well-deserved poor reputation among many people in our society. The missional understanding of church opens the door to a reevaluation of the relationship between the church and the Kingdom, with an expanded view of God’s work in the world.

For missional thinkers, church is a *verb*, a *way of being* in the world. It is not a place where certain religious rites are conducted. Nor is the church a vendor of religious goods and services.¹ The notion of the church as a place, or as a dispenser of programs, is a relic of an era of Christendom that is rapidly diminishing, if not already disappearing beyond the horizon.

In its essence, church is organic, not organizational, though it has institutional and corporate expressions. Church is not a time, a place, or a set of prescribed activities. In short, church is not a *thing*; it’s a *who*. It is the people of God.

Everywhere we go, and everything we do, is informed by our relationship with God, just as everything I do (and some things I *don't* do) as a husband are informed by my marriage to my wife. I don't go to my house to be married. I carry my marriage with me everywhere I go.

Likewise, wherever we go, as Jesus-followers in covenant with God, we are (part of) the church. We gather with other believers, worship God, and practice certain spiritual disciplines. But we don't have to "go to church" in order to be "part of" the church because we *are* the church. We're not *all* of the church, but everywhere we go, the church *is*.

Being church is more than just a catchy way of saying it. It means finding organic ways to express our covenantal relationship with God. Church is incarnated in every aspect of our lives, not just as part of our "church experience" in a local congregation. It means that we see all of life as a mission trip.

Missional church seeks to live out our covenantal relationship with God by finding ways to bless people, both corporately (as groups of believers) and individually. Love of God and love of neighbor are inextricably intertwined in a missional understanding of church. Service to others is a fundamental spiritual discipline. And most important, when we are faithful at *being church*, we point people to the Kingdom.

This understanding of church as a mission-centered relationship presents a challenge for those giving leadership to the institutional church. My role for years now has been to help articulate for church leaders the changes that must be made in order to realign the institutional church with its mission, and to help these leaders develop and implement strategies to move

in a missional direction. To support these shifts, leaders must make some intentional choices. As I make suggestions and share with you the conclusions I've drawn, you will see how my thinking and experience have led me to a broader view of what God is up to in the world. His agenda is far bigger than building the church. He is building his Kingdom.

Kingdom Insights

Helping congregations and leaders become engaged with their local communities has opened their eyes to a very accessible and ripe "mission field." Many congregations have sent hundreds or thousands of people and millions of dollars around the world to support missions activities, but at the same time they have failed to connect with the school across the street or the apartment complex next door. As soon as congregations truly grasp their mission to partner with God in his redemptive mission in the world, it's only natural that they would begin to engage with their local community. I've seen congregations that, once the blinders were off, were stunned by the depth of need in their very own neighborhood: a world of need that has little to do with church programming but everything to do with real-life issues.

This new awareness of what is happening just outside their doors has provoked a crisis for these leaders and their congregations. But it's a good crisis. When church people confront the reality that much of what they have focused on as a congregation is irrelevant and unhelpful to the very people they are called to serve, they often suddenly find themselves eager to engage in what they have previously thought of as nonchurch activity: tutoring school kids so

they can learn to read; teaching English to immigrants so they can assimilate into society; rescuing vulnerable people from human trafficking; and securing affordable housing for families, just to name a few.

Because the Kingdom is about life—*abundant* life, to quote Jesus—I came to realize that all of these life issues are Kingdom concerns. In Jesus' day, a Kingdom outbreak meant that the lame could walk, the blind could see, and the lepers were made whole. Because these physical conditions prevented people from working to support themselves, their disabilities doomed them to beggary and poverty. Delivering people from these maladies made a much better life possible for them.

In our day, manifestations of the Kingdom may still include physical healing, but they also mean that people are freed from limiting conditions that keep them locked into perpetually poor life situations. Thus, Kingdom efforts result in kids learning to read so they have a chance at graduation; the unemployed finding jobs; the uninsured gaining access to adequate health care; and the homeless finding a place to call home.

The Kingdom gives life—not just for those who are served but also for those who serve. Getting in on what God is already up to brings profound, life-giving renewal to congregations and leaders who are taking this path. Many leaders who have become weary of doing church work suddenly find themselves reenergized as they shift their attention and their efforts. Though I still run into clergy every week who are burned out and ready to quit church work, I don't know of a single missional church leader who is ready to throw in the

towel. Tired? Yes. Burned out? No! As one leader nearing retirement age recently told me, “I wish I had thirty more years for ministry.” This desire stands in stark contrast to the sentiment he expressed in our first conversation several years ago, when he complained to me that he was bored and “barely hanging on.” What brought about this change in perspective, energy, and drive? He shifted his ministry focus from church programming to community development. Specifically, he led his congregation in developing a citywide network of after-school resource centers to bring help and hope to kids who are locked up in generational and institutional poverty.

Kingdom engagement thrusts us into situations where abundant life is threatened, compromised, or missing, so that we can serve as advocates for the life that God intends for people to experience. Kingdom enterprise completes the storyline of salvation that all too often has been truncated in our understanding and presentation of the gospel. We assert that we’ve been saved *from* a previous existence *through* the work of Jesus on the cross. And that’s all true. But there’s more to it than that. We’ve also been saved *to* something—namely, eternal life in the Kingdom. Kingdom life is a life of good deeds and service to others. It’s worth doing. In giving away our lives, we gain them back. We ourselves pass from death to life as we help others do the same.

I believe that many Jesus-followers are intimidated by the idea of Kingdom life because we’ve misperceived, or been misinformed about, what it requires. We tend to think of Kingdom living as something extreme or bizarre. This view has been fueled by a recent spate of books in Christian circles suggesting that disciples of Jesus should live dramatically

different lives in order to reflect countercultural Kingdom values. These authors are right, of course, and what I'm about to say is not intended as criticism of their work. (After all, sometimes you have to shout just to get people's attention, so I understand what they are doing.)

Unfortunately, what most often sticks in people's minds are the examples of the more radical, disruptive lifestyle choices. Most people can't give away everything they have, so they draw the wrong conclusion that they cannot be Kingdom-centered in their faith. This is not what these books advocate, by the way, but the enemy whose kingdom we are invading blows things out of proportion to scare us off from considering how we can amend our lives for greater Kingdom impact.

Jesus certainly calls us to a radically different way of life in the Kingdom. It is a call to be people of blessing; to live lives of generosity and grace, service and sensitivity; to be positive examples of joy and contentment in a culture awash in negativity and anxiety. One can hardly be more countercultural than to believe one can make a difference in our communities and then to act on that belief. Throughout this book, I cite examples of everyday people, in their ordinary circumstances, pushing back the darkness where they live, work, play, and go to school.

What is true for us as individuals also holds true for our corporate expressions as the people of God. If you're a church leader, you might be tempted to think that only organic and emerging-church life-forms (such as missional communities) can adopt a Kingdom-centered ministry. Don't fall into that trap. A house church can be incredibly self-absorbed while a

large congregation can pursue an agenda aimed at releasing its social capital to bless its community in profound ways. No matter what form of church expression you currently serve as a leader or a congregant, you can move it toward greater Kingdom-centeredness.

Bottom line: I wrote this book for the vast majority of pastors, leaders, and individual Jesus-followers who want to explore and experience the Kingdom in the places in which they are assigned and in ways that are winsome, doable, and sustainable. As citizens of God's Kingdom, we want to live our everyday lives, in all our life arenas, as people of blessing who help other people experience life as God intends.

As congregations I've consulted with have adopted schools, partnered with local food banks, and worked with neighborhood organizations in various projects, they (and I) have discovered that these issues are too big for any one person to accomplish alone. "We need each other" is a fundamental principle of the Kingdom.

This interdependence is a good thing because it leads us to another discovery: God already has people at work in these vineyards. Often they are people of faith who have been quietly engaged in the business of helping others. A friend of mine who works with an urban ministry in a major city told me about a time when he ran into one of his homeless clients at a nursing home. When asked why he was there, the homeless man said, "I just come here to visit people who don't have anybody to visit them." The staff at the facility confirmed that the homeless man had been doing this for years.

When God's people come out to play—when we decide to move out of the cloister of the church and into the

neighborhoods and the streets, where people are—we find we have lots of company. Just as God has not restricted his Kingdom activity to the church domain, he is not restricted in whom he uses in his Kingdom endeavors. The Scriptures testify to times when he used even wicked kings and rulers (Cyrus of Persia, Herod the Great, and Nero, to name a few) to accomplish his Kingdom purposes. He also uses ordinary people, many of whom are not church people. God has his Kingdom agents everywhere, battling society's ills in every community, even when they don't know they are his Kingdom agents. How much more would he do if we were to unbundle the pent-up social and financial capital of the people inside the walls of so many church buildings?

Moving Ahead

From what I've seen, the church in America abandoned the culture long before the culture abandoned the church. A century ago, the church built hospitals, schools, and nursing homes and operated soup kitchens, orphanages, and community shelters. The people of God were heavily invested in meeting basic human and social needs. Unfortunately, the rise of the fundamentalist movement in the early twentieth century introduced forces that radically altered the church's engagement with the culture. In reaction to the often harsh dogmatism of the fundamentalists, mainline denominations dropped the spiritual emphasis in their social ministries, though they stayed socially engaged. The new evangelicals who emerged, on the other hand, retreated from the social arena to build great congregations, believing this to be the way to help people navigate the fallen world. Both approaches

failed society, falling short of the biblical admonition to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). The mainliners loved people without telling them the whole truth spiritually. The evangelicals told the truth, but often in ways that came across as unloving.

Truth linked with love, taught, and demonstrated—this was the way of Jesus. This path provides the only authentic way forward for the church to regain its credibility, by reshaping its narrative to match the Kingdom storyline.

Over the past two decades, I have been encouraged as I've seen the missional-church movement gain traction. As it has, I've seen the scope of the church's engagement with the local community accelerate. In the early days, I was thrilled if a congregation would set aside one day a year to go out and serve the community somehow. Lately, I've worked with clients who have secured some epic wins, such as raising a quarter-million pounds of food in one week for their region's food bank, eliminating childhood illiteracy in their community, reducing the number of hungry kids in their school district to zero, or establishing a community-based case-worker system to take care of at-risk populations.

As recently as a decade ago, my work was primarily with church teams who often struggled to name two or three city leaders with whom they had any level of relationship. Now I work with city leaders across all domains and sectors of society, many of whom are people of faith, who possess enormous personal passion to leverage their significant positions of influence in order to have a positive impact on their cities. They are eager to partner with faith organizations to work for the common good. Rather than demonstrating allergic

reactions to working with church leaders, they are beseeching and recruiting church leaders to join them. Though they're not waiting around for the church before pursuing their convictions, they welcome the arrival of churches that are willing to invest in community development and bless the city. This is good news for the church. It is the gospel of the Kingdom coming to fruition.

It's time for the people of God to throw a party. A street party. A Kingdom party. A party for life, here and now, on earth as it is in heaven. A renewed focus on the Kingdom here and now promises help and hope for our communities. It may also halt the church's slide into irrelevance in the eyes of the wider culture.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. All this talk of the Kingdom raises an obvious question: "What is the Kingdom, anyway?"

I'm glad you asked.