

Reflections at Easter, 2024

Good News! Our Political Salvation Is At Hand

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Pastors and bible teachers are frequently warned not to venture into politics when they teach or preach sermons. Why is that? Because politics is not what Christianity is about. We all know that Jesus is the one and only solution to our problems. We know that there are no political solutions to the problems that ail us. So politics is, at best, a distraction. This is a very common perspective within certain segments of Christendom. In this brief paper, I intend to challenge this common perspective.

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While reading an article from a Christian periodical the other day, I chanced upon a statement that complained about certain Christians “reducing Christianity to politics.” For most of my life as a bible teacher, I would have agreed with that sentiment without a moment of hesitation. But this time it rather jarred me. It forced me to pause and think: “What does he mean by don’t reduce Christianity to politics?! Rightly understood, the gospel is purely political. Jesus is the ultimate political solution. If you remove the political from the gospel, there is nothing left! How can we not reduce Christianity to politics.”

Now, lest my thinking be misunderstood, I need to define my terms. The word “political” can be used in two very different senses. As Americans, our everyday use of the word denotes the dynamics of the game that gets played by corrupt, power-hungry groups and individuals as they vie for power. Politics is the process whereby one group or another gains control of the governing powers of state. But that use of the word must be distinguished from a more philosophical use of the word. In philosophical terms, “political” is used to denote anything that pertains to the *polis*, and a *polis* is any collection of human beings living together in an organized community.

Now we can all agree, I think, that “politics” in the first sense is not what Christianity is about. We can agree, I think, that Christianity should have nothing to do with the corrupt and silly antics of Democrats, Republicans, Conservatives, Progressives, Socialists, or Libertarians. The hope of the gospel is not something that will be realized in the outcome of the next election. The Christian gospel transcends American politics completely.¹

But that does not mean that Christianity is not *political*. Politics (in the more philosophical sense) is exactly what Christianity is all about. At least, it is exactly what Christianity *should* be all about. Rightly understood, the hope of the gospel is an eager and confident expectation of a political solution to the effects of evil in the world.

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Today is Easter. One of the most significant ramifications of the resurrection of Jesus (of Easter) is this: because Jesus was raised from the dead, the coming of the kingdom of God is inevitable. God raised Jesus from the dead precisely because Jesus had qualified himself to be the king of God’s kingdom when it comes. The apostles describe Jesus as being raised up from the dead and then being taken up and seated at the right hand of the throne of God on high. What does it mean that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God? It means that he is the most exalted being in all of created reality. God himself is the only being with greater power, authority, and honor than Jesus

1. Clearly, it is “politics” in something closer to this sense that the author of the aforementioned article had in mind. Hence, my thesis in this paper is not a critique of that author so much as it is a reflection on biblical truth using one phase that he composed as a point of departure.

has. Next to God, Jesus is the most exalted being of all. Why? Because Jesus is the human individual whom God had predestined to embody his very own authority, as well as to reflect his very own person. But, in order to be granted such an exalted status and role, Jesus was asked by God to undergo an ordeal. He was asked to voluntarily go to a tortured death on the cross in order to make a definitive statement to mankind about what we human beings deserve for our sin and evil. Jesus complied. He obediently went to his death. Therefore, Paul tells us, God greatly exalted him. In *Philippians* we read:

... he (Jesus) humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason, in fact, God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name with the result that, at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow...and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (*Philippians* 2:9b-11)

In other words, Jesus's obedience to the point of death, Paul tells us, led God to exalt him to the highest status of any being in all of reality.

What is the proof—the evidence—that Jesus was exalted to this high status by his Father? He was brought back from the dead. And eventually he was visibly taken up into the heavens. And there were eyewitnesses to all of it. Hundreds of people saw Jesus alive again, well after his dead and broken body had been placed in a tomb. And all of his closest disciples saw him raised up into the air until he disappeared into the clouds. And what did that mean? It meant that God had been so pleased with Jesus's obedience that he was rewarding him with exactly that exalted status that he had predestined him for, before the world had even begun.

And what is the exalted status for which he had been predestined? He was predestined to be God's Messiah, God's Anointed One. That is to say, he was predestined to become the king of the promised kingdom of God.

But if God's purpose has always been to bring about a kingdom with his chosen Messiah as king, then isn't his purpose a *political* one? And if our hope is in the coming kingdom promised by God, isn't our hope hope in a *political* salvation? If the good news that sustains us is that God will right the wrongs and overcome the evils in this world by establishing his kingdom, then doesn't this good news proclaim a *political* solution to the evils of our world?

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To my claim here that God's solution to the evils of our world is a *political* one, a number of likely objections arise. Let me comment on three important ones:

(1) An immediate objection that comes to mind is that the salvation promised in the gospel is the promise of *individual* salvation, not the promise of *communal* salvation. God is not in the business of saving whole communities, he is in the business of saving individual human beings.

But this objection involves a significant confusion. To understand salvation rightly, we need to be clear about exactly what God's purposes are. There are two possible destinies in store for any given individual human being. An individual may be blessed with a blessing that God has promised. Or, he may forfeit that blessing and be punished and destroyed instead. What deter-

mines which of these will be the destiny of any given human individual? If a human individual chooses to follow Jesus—that is, if he makes a momentous, existential decision to commit his whole life and existence to the task of learning from and obeying Jesus as his teacher and master—then he will be granted the ultimate blessing from God. But if he rejects Jesus and refuses to follow him, then he will be rejected. He will be punished and destroyed as a consequence of his choice to reject Jesus. If we describe being granted God’s blessing (and escaping destruction) as salvation, then it follows that salvation is very much an individual affair. The destiny of each and every human individual is determined on an individual, case-by-case basis. Did the individual commit to following Jesus? Then that individual will receive God’s blessing. Did the individual refuse to follow Jesus? Then that individual will receive God’s condemnation to punishment and destruction. Whether an individual is saved, therefore, is a matter of individual salvation.

However, what is the blessing promised in the gospel? The blessing that is promised is *aionic* life. (“Aionic life” is misleadingly and unfortunately translated “eternal life” in most translations.) What is *aionic* life? It is the promise that one will have life and existence in the coming *aion*—in the coming Age. And what does existence in the coming *aion*, the coming Age, involve? It involves several things. Briefly, existence in the coming Age involves an individual’s being immortal and perfectly good, as well as his having a new, more glorious, physical body. But beyond that, it involves his having a place in the kingdom of God that will be established in that coming Age. A significant aspect of the blessing of *aionic* life, therefore, is that the blessed individual will be a member of the people of God who exist as the *ekklesia* of God and who live together under the reign of God’s Messiah in the kingdom that God will establish. To put it another way, the blessed individual will be granted membership in the righteous *polis* that God has promised to bring into being.

So, with respect to the question of WHO will be granted the ultimate blessing, salvation is clearly *individual* salvation. But with respect to the question of WHAT constitutes the ultimate blessing, salvation is clearly *communal*. It is individuals as individuals who are granted God’s blessing. But the blessing that such an individual is granted is to be blessed with an existence within a community of individuals who are living together under the righteous and good rule of king Jesus. So, while we are saved as *individuals*, it is to a *polis* that we are saved—a good and beneficial *polis*, where righteousness prevails. In that sense, then, clearly our salvation is *political* in nature.

(2) A second objection that arises against my claim that the hope of the gospel is political in nature is that God’s promised kingdom is a spiritual entity, not a physical, material entity. Did not Jesus say explicitly that his kingdom is not of this world? In spite of the prophets’ specific, explicit descriptions of God’s promised kingdom in material and physical terms, that is not, in fact, what God ever had in mind. God’s kingdom exists wherever Jesus, his king, reigns. And where is that? Jesus reigns in the hearts and minds of individuals who submit to his authority. Therefore, the kingdom of God is not a place, it is not a geographical location, and it is not a political entity. The kingdom of God is a condition of the inner man of certain individuals.

Where is the “blessing” in such a kingdom? There is presumed to be some positive psycho-emotional state that accompanies submission to the authority of Jesus. Otherwise, why would it be a reward? In other words, if it does not feel fulfilling, peaceful, and altogether pleasant to submit to Jesus’s authority, then how could it be a blessing and a reward?

But if the kingdom of God is the rewarding experience of having Jesus reign as king over my inner being, and if being saved is being delivered from inner pain and turmoil and granted the subjectively rewarding experience of having Jesus reign as king in my heart, then salvation is not political in nature. Rather, it is psychological and subjective in nature. So, if the Christian gospel is all about subjective salvation, then clearly it cannot and should not be reduced to politics. If my salvation is purely subjective in nature, then politics has nothing to contribute to my salvation. For some Christians, it is out of just such a conception of salvation that they insist that Christianity is not about politics. And they are right, if salvation is psychological and emotional in nature.

But, as I will discuss momentarily, such a conception of the kingdom of God is completely fabricated. It is far removed from what the Bible actually teaches.

(3) A third objection—closely related to the last objection—is that God’s promised kingdom is in heaven. God’s kingdom is not something that will be established on the earth. It awaits us in heaven. Again, in spite of all that the prophets explicitly say, the kingdom of God is not a good and beneficial society within human history. It is not a materially prosperous and beneficial existence in this created reality. Rather, it is a rewarding existence in heaven, in the presence of God himself. The blessing of this heavenly existence stems from the the fact that, presumably, it is sheer ecstasy to be in the presence of God—in the presence of his love. It stems from the presumed ecstasy of seeing God and being seen by God. The reward of the kingdom of God, therefore, is everlasting ecstasy.

Most Christians have a conception of heaven that is utterly individualistic. Heaven is existence lived on an island-cloud, composing songs on my harp that only I and God will ever hear, needing no one and no one needing me, far removed from all pain and sorrow. If that is what salvation is, then politics has nothing to contribute to my salvation. Salvation is a matter of my being taken out of this world of evil, sorrow, and pain. It is my metaphysical removal from this world. I am saved by literally being extracted out of the darkness of this world to an entirely different realm—to a spiritual realm that no longer contains any evil, pain, suffering, or bad. For many Christians, it is out of this conception of salvation that they insist that Christianity is not about politics. If salvation is a metaphysical extraction of just this sort, then they are right. Christianity is not about politics at all.

But, again, this is another completely fabricated conception of the kingdom of God. It too is far removed from what the Bible actually teaches.

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The world we live in is evil. Unless we are hopelessly jaded, we grow weary of all the injustice, lying, cruelty, inhumanity, lack of compassion, selfishness, greed, and ... (I don’t need to enumerate all the ways in which evil manifests itself in this world.)... We grow weary of all the ways that evil victimizes us, as well as others. When we are faced with the evil of this world, we can experience two very different desires:

(a) On the one hand, we might desire to escape it. We no longer want to feel the pain of this existence. We don’t want to weep and grieve any longer. We want happiness, not sorrow. We want out of here. We want to go to a place of peace and rest; a pleasant place where we will no longer

be touched by pain and sorrow. Out of this desire, my heart cries out, "God take me out of this world so that I can *escape its evils*."

(b) On the other hand, we might desire to have it fixed. We no longer want the world to be so evil and unrighteous. We want there to no longer be any room for evil to manifest itself. We want injustice to be eliminated. We want war, conflict, and fighting to exist no longer. We want love to replace the hate, goodness to replace the badness. Out of this desire, my heart cries out, "God fix this world; establish goodness and righteousness in this world; make it so that the world is no longer evil. End this present evil age and *bring about an age of goodness and truth*."

Now to which of these desires is the gospel of the kingdom a response? It answers to the latter desire, not the former one. The gospel proclaims that God intends to bring about an age of goodness and truth. It does not promise to remove us from this world so that we can escape its evils. It promises to bring about a radically new world—a world where righteousness abounds and unrighteousness is made rare. That is what the prophets explicitly describe. When the prophets teach of the kingdom of God—of the reign of Yahweh through his appointed Messiah—they describe a coming age of light that will replace the present domain of darkness. They do not envision the world persisting in darkness while God removes his people from it and takes them into some other realm of light. They envision God making things right in this world. The prophets speak of the kingdom of God as being a chapter in the history of this present created reality. It is not something lying alongside and other than this present created reality. It is a reality that will inevitably come to pass and will be a part of human history itself.

The fabricated and false concepts of the kingdom of God that abound in Christianity are attractive to Christians who want the first desire above satisfied. They want an escape from the evils of this world. They are not so much interested in this evil world itself being fixed. The world can go to hell, so long as we can be taken out of it to a place untouched by pain and sorrow. The Christian fiction of being taken up to heaven and enjoying ecstasy in the presence of God is an obvious example of this. But, while it is more subtle, the Christian fiction of the kingdom of God being "within me" is another example of the same thing. Both of these fictions involve the promise that I can escape the evils of this world, without making any promises concerning the world itself. "To hell with the world, God, just deliver me out of it, please!"

But it never has been and never will be God's purpose to satisfy my desire to *escape* this evil world. God's purpose always has been and always will be to *fix* this evil world. As a first step, he will establish his Messiah, Jesus, to be king over Israel, and Jesus will enforce peace and righteousness in the world with a "rod of iron." He will bring about a period of peace, safety, prosperity, and a relative freedom from unrighteousness, unlike anything human history has ever seen. Then, in the next step, God will literally create a new heavens and new earth where evil is eradicated altogether. That will constitute the everlasting kingdom of God in the eternal age to come. Hence, God's purpose is not to rescue us out of this evil world and take us to some other blessed existence. Rather, in addition to delivering us from our own personal evil, God's purpose is to deliver the world itself from its evil. His purpose is to make existence in this created reality an experience of righteousness and goodness.

Now human existence is inherently and inescapably social and communal. Human beings just do share human existence in common with one another. We do not and cannot exist as isolated, independent beings. We create, and live in, society. We build cultures. We dwell in organized com-

munities. As Aristotle rightly concluded, “man is a ‘political animal.’” We do and must exist in a *polis*—a city, a state, a nation, a kingdom. Therefore, if God’s purpose is to fix the world of human beings, then his purpose necessarily includes fixing the *polis* of man. His promise of a kingdom is his promise to establish a righteous and just *polis*. So we have come back full circle to where we started. The promise of the kingdom of God is God’s **political solution** to the evil in the world. God intends to establish a new *polis* one day. In that day, Jesus will reign as a righteous king over a kingdom that he establishes in righteousness.

When seen in this light, bemoaning the fact that some Christians want to reduce Christianity to politics is somewhat ignorant. For indeed, the Christian gospel is fundamentally political. If nothing else, our hope is a political hope. Our hope is that Jesus will return and transform the political state of the entire world. “Jesus for king!” is (or, in any case, should be) the fundamental cry of every believer’s heart.

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The aforementioned article that provoked these thoughts bemoaned the fact that some Christians might be inclined to reduce Christianity to politics. Giving the author the benefit of the doubt, he likely would acknowledge that there is, in fact, a dimension to the believer’s hope that is political. What he objects to, apparently, is elevating that political dimension to being the principle, or perhaps only, dimension to Christianity. Christianity might be political, he admits, but it is not *only* political, and not **primarily** political. It is primarily something else. So what exactly is he thinking? If Christianity is not primarily political, then what is it, primarily? Beyond the political hope contained in the proclamation of the kingdom of God, what else might Christianity be that is of such great importance that it must not be eclipsed by the political, nor overlooked because of the political?

I cannot speak for that author, but—from my experience—there are at least three different things that Christians typically understand their Christianity to be about: (i) personal fulfillment; (ii) religion, and (iii) piety. And, indeed, most Christians probably conceive of Christianity to be **primarily** and **essentially** about one of these three things. And in any one of these three cases, to “reduce” Christianity to the political would be to render it no longer Christianity at all.

(A) Many modern Christians consider the whole point of Christianity to be a path to self-improvement or self-fulfillment *in the here and now*. (Note that my emphasis is on self-improvement *in the here and now*.) On the one hand, I might believe in Jesus because I want to be made whole, fixed, or healed. Or, at least, I want to become a better version of who I am. I want to become a better human being. I want to be able to transcend my natural sinfulness and become a truly good person. And I want to do it **now**. Or—on the other hand—I might believe in Jesus because I want to find true fulfillment, to realize my full potential for happiness or satisfaction. Either of these perspectives on the faith conceive of Christian belief as a sort of *therapeutic philosophy*.² Christianity offers a solution to all that is wrong with me and all that is wrong with my

2. I would define a philosophy as a “therapeutic philosophy” if it purports to teach a person how to escape pain, suffering, and/or unhappiness in his life in the here and now. The distinctive of therapeutic philosophy that makes it clearly and decidedly different from the biblical gospel is its emphasis on the here and now. The gospel promises a

experience in this world. "Come to Jesus and all will be made well." That is the evangelistic pitch that follows from this understanding of the Christian faith. "Are you lonely, sad, empty, hollow, and in despair? Does your life have no meaning? Do you want to be a happier, more successful person? You need Jesus. Jesus will bring you fulfillment and satisfaction. He will bring you all that you need and lack."

Note that Christianity as a therapeutic philosophy sees our salvation in strictly individualistic terms. It is I who can be saved by Jesus, not society. Society can be saved only by saving every individual within it. But saving the structure and nature of society itself, that is beside the point of therapeutic salvation. And, if Christianity is a therapeutic philosophy, then "reducing it to the political" is indeed a significant distortion of what Christianity is.

(B) Other Christians consider that the whole point of Christianity is to define a religious way of life. Christianity is first and foremost a religion. It prescribes a rhythm for our lives. Go to church, perform certain rituals, and go away from church satisfied that you have duly honored God and are, therefore, genuinely pleasing to him. Some Christians may see honoring God through their religion as an end in itself. Others, however, see honoring God through their religion as the only effective means to a very different end—namely, to the end of gaining some control over their life and experience. If—through my practice of religion—I make myself pleasing to God, then God will bless me with success in all of my endeavors. And if God is on my side (if he is going to bless my efforts), then—through those efforts—I can successfully control my life and experience. Now note that Christianity as a religion, unlike Christianity as a therapeutic philosophy, does not necessarily see our salvation in strictly individualistic terms. A religious Christian may faithfully do his religious duty because he wants to cause God to bless his efforts to make the world a better place. He may have the confident expectation that, through his faithful religious practice, he is inducing God to transform his society. So, Christianity as religion does not rule out Christianity being political. However, "reducing Christianity to the political," on this view, would disregard the most important tool that we have been given for bringing about political change. It would be overlooking religious obedience as the all-important impetus for divine help.

However, this is a false view of Christianity. Seeing religion as the essence of Christianity is a mistake. Jesus clearly taught the opposite. He taught that religion is NOT the point. We see this clearly in Jesus's discussion with the Samaritan woman at the well:

The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, *an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what*

solution to pain, suffering, and unhappiness. But it does not promise it in the here and now.

we know, for salvation is from the Jews. *But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be his worshippers. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*"

(John 4:19–24, emphasis mine)

Rightly understood, Jesus's statement here is deemphasizing religious practice. Jesus makes it clear that worshipping God is first and foremost about authentically embracing the truth from God in one's inner being. Does it involve religious practice? Only to the extent that a person's religious practice reflects his embrace of the truth. If, in fact, it does reflect his embrace of the truth, then his religious practice can be meaningful. But it is never necessary. The essence of true worship is the inward embrace of truth itself, not the religious expression of it.

So, what is the bottom line here? While many Christians see religion and religious practice as the very essence of Christianity, that is a mistake. Religious practice is a meaningful act of worship only to the extent that it flows from and is reflective of an inward embrace of God's truth. Therefore—in light of Jesus's downplaying the importance of religion—"reducing Christianity to politics" such that it eclipses its religious nature is not the great distortion that the aforementioned article warns against.

(C) Finally, still other Christians consider that the whole point of Christianity is to prescribe a life of piety. The Christian prays, reads his Bible, tithes, meditates, fasts, and engages in various other spiritual acts wherein he loves and adores God. This is akin to Christianity being a religion. But while personal piety honors God through a series of *individual* acts of piety, religion honors God through a routine of rituals engaged in *corporately*. But the individual / corporate distinction is the only important distinction. Everything I asserted above about Christianity as a religion could also be said about Christianity as personal piety—including the very important point that the essence of true worship is the inward embrace of truth itself, not the piety that might give expression to it.

So, if we rightly understand the teaching of Jesus, there exists no essential dimension to faith beyond one's believing the truth about God's promised "political solution." While religion and piety might have a valid place, and while there is indeed a therapeutic aspect to God's promised salvation, the essential core message of the gospel—that is, the Truth that is proclaimed in the gospel—pertains to a political salvation that will be brought about by Jesus, the king.

Now there is, of course, an important warning that must be heeded. Some Christians may indeed succumb to the temptation to place their hope in a contemporary political figure, anticipating that that particular individual will enact policies that will right the wrongs in our society and heal the ills of our culture. That is a huge mistake. But their mistake is not that they are looking for a political solution. When Jesus comes, it is a political solution that he brings. He will rule "with a rod of iron." He will impose righteousness and vigorously enforce it. So their mistake is not in looking for a political solution. Rather, their mistake is in looking to the wrong individual to bring about this political solution. We must never put our hope in anyone other than Jesus. Jesus, and Jesus alone, has what it takes to rule righteously, effectively, wisely, and competently. Only

Jesus walks in the light and does not stumble. Any other political leader walks in darkness and inevitably stumbles.³

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From the view that the gospel promises a political (rather than a *therapeutic*) solution to the evils of this age, some very important implications follow. I will comment on some of its implications for evangelism, for discipleship, and for American politics:

IMPLICATIONS FOR EVANGELISM

Coming into adulthood as the so-called “Jesus movement” came to fruition in American culture, I found myself performing the role of a Christian activist. I engaged in evangelistic (and pre-evangelistic) leafleting. I proclaimed Jesus from the free speech platform on my college campus. I did whatever I could think to do to persuade others to believe in Jesus. The only approach to evangelism that I knew (the only approach I had ever seen modeled) was to approach evangelism as a salesman. My task was to “sell” belief in Jesus to people. As a consequence, my task was to answer the question, “Why should I believe in Jesus?” And the sort of answer I offered was along the lines of “You should believe in Jesus because belief in Jesus will make your life go better.” My evangelism was predicated entirely on my conception of Christianity as a *therapeutic* philosophy. But today—after decades of studying the Bible and seeking to better understand its truth—I have come to realize that the benefit of believing in Jesus is not primarily that it brings a *therapeutic* solution. As I have been discussing in this paper, it brings primarily a political solution. Granted, it ultimately has important therapeutic ramifications—after all, belief in Jesus will eventually lead to my personal healing and transformation, to my being made whole and righteous. But that is a promise for my future. It is not a promise for now. The primary promise of the gospel is the promise of a place in the kingdom of God—a political reality. So, why should a person believe in Jesus? Not in order to make his life NOW go better. That may or may not happen. Rather, one should believe in Jesus because Jesus is at the center of God’s primary purpose in created reality. He is at the heart of God’s grand promise to bring about a new age of righteousness. So, if I want to know, understand, and be in touch with God’s purpose to fulfill this promise, then I need to understand the role and significance of Jesus. And to understand that I need to know and understand the teaching of Jesus. And if I want to be on the right side of what God is doing and purposing, and if I want to experience the blessing that God has promised to give, then I need to belong to Jesus as one of his followers. Jesus is the very center of the truth about what God is doing in history. If I want to be grounded in that truth, I need to believe in Jesus.

An accurate evangelistic message, therefore, will not “sell” belief in Jesus as the way to a better life in the here and now. Rather, it will matter-of-factly declare the truth that Jesus—the most important being in all of created reality, the future king of the coming kingdom of God, and the one with authority to judge mankind—has entered into human history. Either I will have a place in the everlasting society and culture that Jesus will eventually build (that is, in the everlasting kingdom of God), or I will be duly punished for my evil and destroyed. Jesus is the one who will

3. Note *John* 11:9–10 as discussed in the video “The Parables of Jesus–Talk #4” on the *soundinterp.site* website.

determine my fate. The way I escape punishment and destruction and have a place in the coming kingdom of God is by siding with Jesus, by embracing and supporting the truth that Jesus is the king. It is then, and only then, that I will have a place in the kingdom of God. All those who reject this truth will be punished and destroyed.

We must stop lying in our evangelistic appeals. We cannot honestly promise that a person's life will go better if he simply chooses to believe in Jesus. We *can* promise that, if he chooses to believe in Jesus, he will have a place in the kingdom of God in the age to come. But even that is not why a person should believe in Jesus and the gospel. Fundamentally, one should believe the truth concerning Jesus because it is the TRUTH. Granted, a reward will come to the individual who believes that truth. But, apart from any reward, one should believe it because it is the TRUTH. One needs no other reason to believe it beyond that. So what is the fundamental appeal that I should make as an evangelist? Not, "Come to Jesus and your life will go better." Rather, "Come to Jesus and you will be in touch with what is true. Come to Jesus and you will know and understand what is really going down." And, what is that? What is really going down? God is going to establish his kingdom within history and Jesus the Messiah will be its king.

We fear that such an appeal would not be sufficiently interesting or attractive to people. Fair enough, most people will not really care that the kingdom of God is coming. The very concept of an eventual kingdom of righteousness is so abstract and distant that it holds little interest for the vast majority of people. The promise of happiness in the here and now is a much more interesting and attractive message. That is why Christians have succumbed to the temptation to shape their evangelistic message in that direction. But improving on the gospel's appeal in just this way is both immoral and ineffective. It is immoral because we are making a false promise. It is ineffective because it can never lead to authentic belief in the true gospel. I am not accomplishing the purposes of God if I get people to respond positively to a false promise. Real belief leading to real salvation does not occur when a person responds to the false promise of a false gospel. True belief in the true gospel is an embrace of the truth concerning Jesus *because it is true*. Only a select few will believe the true gospel merely because it is true—namely, only those whom God has chosen for himself and within whom he has created a responsive heart. Individuals who have been suckered into believing a counterfeit gospel are not really children of God at all. They have not been chosen, and they will not be blessed with eternal life.

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In J.R.R. Tolkien's series, *Lord of the Rings*, certain people in Gondor had kept alive and were living in anticipation of the long-awaited return of their king. For them, that was an exciting and welcome prospect. The first time I read *Lord of the Rings*, I could not relate to their excitement over such a thing. Decades of bible study later, I am beginning to understand. Clearly, Tolkien was attempting to portray the hope of the Jesus-believer in the hope of the people of Gondor. What is the hope of the Jesus-believer? His hope is that Jesus will return and inaugurate his rule.

Why is that not immediately exciting to me? It is not immediately exciting to me because of the way my mind frames it. In my mind, Jesus's return is nothing more than a mere change of administration. My life will go on the same as always. The only difference is that there will be a new king in Jerusalem. That is all fine and good, so far as it goes. But what is that to me? I still need to get up, go to work, and continue living the same old life I have always been living. If I

am a baker, I still go to the bakery every day and bake bread. Will I really care that Jesus has begun to rule in Jerusalem?

By comparison to this rather inconsequential hope, it is easy to see why the hope of traditional Christianity seems more exciting than this. Traditional Christianity teaches that what awaits me is a radically new and different existence. I will be a radically new and different being in a radically new and different realm. I will be a "spiritual" being (that is, a disembodied soul) dwelling in heaven. My earthly existence will come to an end and I will begin a heavenly existence. In heaven, there will be no work, no toil, no pain, no suffering. There will be nothing but bliss and delightful leisure for ever.

Such a heavenly existence sounds exciting until I stop to reflect upon it. Would I really find everlasting leisure fulfilling? Would I find eternal bliss rewarding? I don't think so. Boredom is the thief that steals the joy out of any circumstance. And everlasting leisure, I think, would be excruciatingly boring. So while, on the surface, it may seem that the traditional understanding of our ultimate blessing is more exciting than the biblical teaching about the kingdom of God, as a matter of fact, it is not. We simply need to frame it differently in our minds. Rightly understood, the return of the king and the inauguration of the kingdom of God is a very exciting hope.

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I am now, and will forevermore be, a human being. God's ultimate blessing—if it is to serve as a reward at all—must be something that a human being would experience as rewarding. Perhaps a disembodied soul can find ongoing joy in total passivity. (I don't know, I've never been a disembodied soul.) But a human being cannot. In order to live a full and rewarding existence, a human life must be filled with human things and human activities. This is inherent to the picture of *aionic* life that the bible paints. *Aionic* life is **human** life. It is *human* existence filled with *human* activities and *human* things. But it will be an existence void of unrighteousness, death, decay, and futility.

Our human existence in this present evil age can sometimes be hell for some people. When we contemplate this fact, it is easy to reach the conclusion that salvation must consist of being rescued out of human existence. Then, and only then, can we be rescued from the hell that human existence can be. But that is a fallacy. The reason human existence can sometimes be hell is not because it is *human*; rather, it is because it is existence in an *evil* age. What grieves us and causes us sorrow is not the humanity of our existence, it is the evil, death, decay, and futility to which our existence is subject. Human existence void of evil, death, decay, and futility would no longer be something from which I want and need to be rescued. Even now—even as we exist in this present evil age—we experience moments of sheer delight. As human beings, having a wide variety of different human experiences, we can find real joy in the midst of this evil world. Being human is not the problem. Being sinners living among other sinners, that is the problem. Confronting death, decay, and futility is the problem. Remove sin, death, decay, and futility from my existence, and my existence would be a wonderful thing. All of it. Nothing else would have to change. It is only when I understand that *aionic* life is human existence with all the evils removed that I can begin to grasp the value of *aionic* life.

Aionic life will be a form of human life and existence. Hence, I can expect it to be filled with many of the same human activities, endeavors, adventures, and challenges that fill up my present

human existence. It will be largely continuous with the existence I have now, not radically discontinuous. But the sources of sorrow and grief will be removed. There will no longer be death, and evil will no longer hold sway. The hope of traditional Christianity is that we will be rescued out of human existence. The hope of biblical belief is that we will be rescued from sin and death, but not that we will be taken out of human existence. Our humanity will persist. In one form or another, we will experience human existence for all eternity.

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Life in this present evil age is bittersweet. On the one hand, there are many satisfying and rewarding aspects to my life in this present age. But, on the other hand, there are many evils in this present age that cause me sorrow and grief. When I contemplate all the different ways that evil victimizes people, I can become emotionally overwhelmed. I find that I have to switch off my empathy lest I become overloaded with grief. I long to see evil eradicated from this world, to see the pain and sorrow caused by evil to cease. I would be overjoyed to see this world without war, without hate, without racism, without oppression, without injustice, without fraud, without manipulation, without bullying, without coercion...in other words, I would be overjoyed to see this world become truly and thoroughly righteous. But that is exactly how the bible conceives of the kingdom of God. That is exactly what the Jesus-believer has placed his hope in. Rightly understood and rightly appreciated, the kingdom of God is a very exciting thing. And since the kingdom of God will be inaugurated by Jesus, the appointed king, it follows that the return of Jesus is a very exciting and joyous thing. Contrary to the way our minds tend to frame it, Jesus's return is not inconsequential. It is not as if nothing about our lives will change, that the only change will be having Jesus listed as the king of Israel in our geography books. Quite the contrary, *everything* will change. He will bring about the beginning of an entirely new and different age. We will leave this present evil age behind and will enter a utopian age of righteousness, peace, and prosperity. Figuratively speaking, we will begin to dwell on a new earth, under new skies.

This is the excitement that Tolkien was seeking to capture by portraying the men of Gondor as excited about the return of their king. An accurate evangelistic appeal, therefore, is nothing more and nothing less than appealing to people to become right with God so that they will have a place in the glorious kingdom of God, the political reality that is about to be inaugurated upon the return of Jesus.

2) IMPLICATIONS FOR DISCIPLESHIP

How one conceives of being a disciple of Jesus depends upon what one understands to be the essence of the Christian faith. If Christianity is essentially an individualistic *therapeutic* philosophy, then discipleship is a matter of learning the way (the path) that Jesus taught to personal fulfillment (or healing or wholeness) and seeking to follow it. But if Christianity is essentially a religion (or a life of personal piety), then discipleship is a matter of learning the right way to do the prescribed set of religious or spiritual practices and seeking to faithfully perform those practices. But if I am right, if Christianity—rightly understood—is essentially believing that God is going to establish his kingdom with Jesus as king, then discipleship is a matter of understanding and embracing this very truth. Rightly understood, therefore, discipleship can be characterized, in part, by all of the following statements:

(1) *The disciple of Jesus will strive to learn and understand the truth about the kingdom of God.*

Not every disciple will be equipped and motivated to discover for himself what the Bible teaches about the kingdom of God. Not every disciple is called to that role. But every true disciple will be motivated to know and understand what it is that the Bible teaches regarding the kingdom of God. That involves two things. He must understand what the prophets of Israel had already disclosed about the nature of the kingdom of God. And he must understand the new insights that Jesus came to disclose to us about the kingdom of God—those certain hidden secrets regarding who will have a place in the kingdom of God. By coming to understand what the Bible teaches him about these things, the true disciple will understand who he must strive to be and what he must strive to do in order to gain a place in the kingdom of God for himself.

We can note for emphasis one thing in particular that it is important for the *contemporary* disciple of Jesus to learn: the contemporary disciple—having been misled by centuries of faulty teaching—must come to understand that the kingdom of God is the culmination and intended end of the same human existence he dwells in now. It will not be radically discontinuous with his present human existence. It will not be as a disembodied spirit in some other spiritual realm. He will experience the kingdom of God on earth, in a human body—albeit a glorified one. And his experience in the kingdom of God will be a human experience, filled up with human things and human activities—things that human beings can relate to and which human beings can find rewarding. In other words, he must learn that the blessing of *aionic* life (life in the kingdom of God) is not intended by God to be a replacement for life as a human being. Rather, it is intended to be an extension of his life in the here and now that has been perfected. He must come to understand that the blessing that God has in store for those who belong to him is not some one-dimensional experience of constant bliss. Rather, like our lives in the here and now, it is multi-dimensional, dynamic, changing, and varied.

(2) *The disciple of Jesus will share the truth of the kingdom of God with others and will encourage them to believe it.*

The ultimate blessing that God has in store for anyone who belongs to him is to have a life and existence in the kingdom of God—a new and revolutionary political reality that God has purposed to bring into being. The kingdom of God will be a society of many diverse individuals who will live together in obedience to and under the righteous rule of Jesus. Under Jesus governance, these people will become a society, a culture, a nation, and a people where evil is held in check (and eventually is eradicated completely) and where goodness prevails. Being given the opportunity to experience and be a part of this society, culture, nation, and people—that is the ultimate blessing that God has in store for those of us who belong to him. That is our reward for following Jesus.

As a consequence, when we introduce others to the truth of God's kingdom and encourage them to believe it, we are playing a part in adding to the numbers of that kingdom. We are playing a part in growing the body of people who will build the society, culture, and nation that is called the kingdom of God. And, as a consequence, we are playing a role in bringing into being the very reward that we are hoping in. The hope of the disciple of Jesus is not

merely a hope in his own personal transformation—in his own rescue from his own evil. It is that, but it is not only that. The disciple of Jesus has placed his hope in an entire society of righteous people who love and serve Jesus as their king. As a consequence, the true disciple will eagerly work toward the realization of that hope by inviting others to join the body of individuals who will form that society.

(3) The disciple of Jesus will live in anticipation of the return of Jesus as king.

As the true disciple grows in his knowledge and understanding of what the promise of the kingdom of God is, he will grow in his desire and longing to see it come to fruition. Therefore, he lives in eager anticipation of the day when Jesus returns, the day when the kingdom of God is inaugurated.

(4) The disciple of Jesus will possess the mindset of one who actively and eagerly supports the idea of Jesus being our king. He will have the mindset of a loyalist, a fan, a supporter, and a partisan of Jesus.

The true disciple of Jesus is a member of a political movement, not a member of a religious institution (e.g., a church). He is part of a movement that is anticipating and looking forward to the realization of a revolutionary new stage of human history—a stage of history that will begin with the return of King Jesus. All of his energy and support is directed toward supporting the idea that Jesus should reign as king.⁴

(5) The disciple of Jesus strives to live in obedience to his king and master, Jesus.

Jesus was very explicit on this point. “If you love me,” Jesus said, “you will keep my instruction.” It is those who keep Jesus’s teaching—and only those who keep his teaching—who belong to him and will be granted a place in his kingdom. And it is only those who are seeking to obey what Jesus taught who can be said to be “keeping” his teaching. So, the true disciple devotes his life to striving to obey what his lord and master Jesus taught. All of eternity is going to be devoted to serving and obeying Jesus as our king. In the here and now, therefore, one begins to practice being what he will be for all eternity—an obedient servant of Jesus, the king.

IMPLICATIONS FOR AMERICAN POLITICS

At two different levels, how I live my life now, as a disciple of Jesus, is lived in anticipation of what my eternal existence will be:

1. With regard to the level of my *personal* salvation, my eternal reward will involve my being a perfectly good human individual. I will no longer be evil. Being good will come naturally to me in eternity. I will no longer have to struggle against the evil inclinations of my innate sinfulness. That is then. But what about now? In the here and now I hunger and thirst after the

4. This is actually what the name “Christian” means. Just as a follower and political supporter of Herod was called a *Herodianos*, a follower and political supporter of the Christ was called a *Christianos* (from which we get the name “Christian.”) That, therefore, is what a true disciple is—he is a political supporter and follower of Messiah Jesus. When the New Testament identifies a disciple of Jesus as a *Christianos*, it is as if it is identifying the follower of Yeshua (Jesus) as a *Yeshu-ite*, or as a *Yeshuista*.

righteousness that will one day be mine. And because I have such a hunger, I strive to achieve that righteousness even now, in my present existence. Hence, I commit my life to striving to be as truly good as I can be. I am thwarted in that effort by my own innate sinfulness. I am incapable of actually being good and righteous. I continually demonstrate that, as a matter of fact, I am "of flesh, sold into bondage to sin." But, moral failure though I am, I am a moral failure that seeks to practice and emulate the righteousness that will one day be mine in the kingdom of God.

2. With regard to the level of *communal* salvation—with regard to the political salvation that I anticipate—my eternal reward will involve my participation in a community of righteous individuals who have cooperatively built a truly good society and culture together, under the guidance of king Jesus. That is then. What about now? In the here and now I hunger and thirst after that righteous society that will one day come to be. The truths and principles that will form the foundation of that righteous society—the principles of justice, goodness, and rightness that will be embodied in the kingdom of God one day—I long to see them embodied in the society that I live in now. Hence, I do whatever I can to see that the goodness and justice of the kingdom of God are embodied in the laws and structures of modern American society. I am thwarted in that effort, not only by my own innate sinfulness, but also by the sinfulness of every American citizen around me. I am under no illusions that we will be able to attain the kingdom of God in America, in the here and now. But as futile and quixotic as such an endeavor might be, I cannot help myself. As a disciple of Jesus who longs to see the kingdom of God, I can do no other than do my part to make modern American society as much like the kingdom of God as possible, as righteous and good as possible. Therefore, to the extent that the American form of government allows, I do everything I can to help bring it about that our society is good, and just, and righteous. The politician who shares my longing to see America emulate the values of the kingdom of God, he is the one I will support. Not because I have mistaken him for Jesus. Only Jesus is fit to rule. Only Jesus is fit to be king. But in the meantime, while we await Jesus's return, I am obligated by my hope in the gospel, to support officials who want to see laws and policies that attempt to emulate the righteousness of Jesus's rule. It would be unrighteous to support rulers who show no regard for this. How can I claim to want Jesus for king when the choices I make in the context of American politics will result in a society and culture that is the very antithesis of the kingdom of God?

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Given how central Jesus's kingship is to the gospel message, it is surprising how neglected it is in our discourse about him. His very title, Messiah, screams out to us that this is who Jesus is. To call Jesus the Messiah is to call him the King. Today is Easter. Today, of all days, we should remember this fact about Jesus. When God raised Jesus from the dead, he was passing judgment on Jesus's qualifications. On that first Easter morning, God was declaring that Jesus had finally and completely qualified himself to serve as King over the coming Kingdom of God. And when God visibly raised him up into the heavens to seat him at his right hand, he was declaring that very fact, vividly and clearly. Now, only one thing remains to occur. Come, Lord Jesus, and begin your magnificent reign over all the earth! We await you.