

Ephesians: a kingdom perspective



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Foreword

Realizing that Jesus made the kingdom of God the centre of everything—his identity, his understanding of salvation history, his teaching, his ministry, his mission—I wondered what would change if I looked at things from his perspective. Back in 2011, I had no idea how this question would revolutionize my life.

So, I began by reading all the Jewish literature from the time leading up to Jesus for insight on what *kingdom of God* meant to him and his hearers. It was the story they were living, the story of the nation called to be the representative kingdom of God among the nations. But this nation no longer existed as an independent kingdom. They yearned for the restoration of what had fallen apart, the completion of God's project to bring the world back under his reign through the Abrahamic family.

That's when I realized I needed to re-read the Old Testament as the unfinished story of the kingdom of God. From this perspective, they were no longer a series of disconnected stories. The story of the heavenly king rescuing his earthly realm back into his governance became the most intriguing thriller I've ever read.

In 2016, I began sharing this journey of Seeking the Kingdom at <https://allenbrowne.blog/>. There you'll find over 100 posts tracking the foundational story of the kingdom of God in the opening books of the Torah, and another 150 tracing Jesus as the king who fulfils the kingdom story in the first half of Matthew.

So, what happens when you read a New Testament epistle from this perspective? The book you're reading applies the kingdom perspective to Ephesians. It's compiled from 50 blog posts from 2019 and 2020.

The first three chapters of Ephesians explain the gospel message as the good news announcement that God's anointed ruler (the Christ) has received the throne and is restoring us all under his leadership (our Lord). The final three chapters then apply this truth, explaining what it looks like to live as the community in his reign (in Christ).

A quick glance shows that this commentary emphasizes the second half, how we live as the kingdom of God. As you read in more detail, you'll see how we continually show the second half (Ephesians 4 – 6) as the outworking of the good news in the first half (Ephesians 1 – 3).

My prayer is that this inspires us in the way we live Christ's restorative kingship in the world today.

Allen Browne

May, 2020.

Part 1:

The good news message (Ephesians 1 – 3)

Ephesians 1

The significance of kingdom in New Testament letters (Eph 1:1)

Jesus built his theology around the kingdom of God. But is that a central theme in the epistles? Even the most basic texts come to life through this lens.

Here's one we skip over:

Ephesians 1 ¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to God's holy people [in Ephesus], the faithful in Christ Jesus.

Is this just the boring bit about who the letter is from and to? Absolutely not! There's an authority claim here that could revolutionize our worldview.

The modern Western world restricts God to the religious compartment of life: worship, prayer, church, and personal piety. We don't conceive of God as someone with political power, so we don't understand how God is sorting out all the injustices on earth through his anointed ruler (the Christ).

Ephesians 1:1 describes the chain of command from which we derive our identity, our place in what God is doing: God => Jesus => Paul => us.

- **God** is the ultimate sovereign, the rightful ruler of heaven and earth.
- **Jesus** is God's anointed ruler (*Christ*), appointed by the will of the heavenly sovereign who raised him out of death to the throne.
- **Paul** is a commissioned ambassador (*apostle*) of Jesus' kingship. Jesus appointed apostles to proclaim and enact his kingship (Matthew 10:2, 7).
- **The recipients** are those devoted to God's holy reign (*God's holy people*), those with loyalty to King Jesus (*the faithful in Christ Jesus*).

Now, you might be wondering, "Why do you see all that in this verse, Allen? Aren't you reading too much into it?" If so, you're reading Ephesians in isolation, missing the canonical context that packs these phrases with meaning.

The story begins with God as sovereign, and humans commissioned as his agents (Genesis 1). When the nations reject God's kingship, God commissions Abraham as his agent (Genesis 12). When Jacob's descendants are oppressed by evil kingship, God commissions Israel as *the holy people* commissioned to represent divine kingship to the nations (Exodus 19:6).

But *the holy people* so misrepresented God's kingship that he took the kingdom from them, and they found themselves under foreign rule (Ezekiel 34). So God announced he would take the kingdom from the beasts, and give it to *one like a Son of Man*. (Daniel 7:13-14). *The holy people* of God receive the kingdom in him:

Daniel 7 ¹⁸The holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever. ... ²⁷The sovereignty, power and greatness of all the kingdoms under heaven will be handed over to the holy people of the Most High. (NIV)

God is sovereign. *His anointed* is the Davidic king. *God's holy people* are those under his kingship. And Paul finds his identity in this chain of command as ambassador (*apostle*) of King Jesus.

Confirming this canonical reading, *God's holy people* are identified as *the faithful in Christ Jesus*. The word group for faith (*pistis*) means both faith and faithfulness. *The faithful in Christ* are those who place their trust in King Jesus, giving loyalty and allegiance to God's anointed.

The ultimate evidence that this is a kingdom story is the way the letter unfolds this message:

- What God has done in the Messiah is what he had always planned to do (1:3-10).
- If only our eyes could see Jesus' kingly reign (1:15-23)!
- In the Messiah's resurrection, we are released from the reign of sin and death (2:1-8).
- God has reunified both streams of humanity, giving Jews and gentiles citizenship in the Messiah, his anointed king (2:14-22).

The whole letter is saturated in divine kingship, the wonderful news of the kingdom of God being reconstituted over all the people of the earth in God's anointed ruler (in Christ). It's a call for God's holy people (those who give fealty to King Jesus), to be the kingdom of God in the present, to live in Christ (in God's Anointed) every day, for the benefit of his world.

Ephesians 1:1 (interpretative translation)

From Paul, an ambassador of King Jesus, the one anointed to rule the world by God's design.

To the devoted people who represent his kingship, the kingdom subjects loyal to King Jesus.

The centre of Jesus' theology (the kingdom of God) gives life to even the most basic texts. Join me in re-reading Scripture (including the epistles) as the revelation of God, our ruler.

The destiny God has planned for us (Eph 1:4-10)

Does God choose which of us makes it in the end?

You know that feeling when you meet someone for the first time, and they remind you of someone else? Previous experiences shape our current perceptions.

Previous experiences also shape what we see in Scripture. We bring with us what we've heard and believed over the years. That's why it's such a surprise when someone reads it differently.

A practical example: there's a tradition where words like *predestination* and *election* mean God choosing some individuals to save, and others to damn. If you've accepted this all your life, you may not see another possibility—that it's about God pre-planning the rescue of humanity through the Messiah, not pre-assigning individual destinies for heaven or hell.

Election language has its roots in the Abraham story. God *chose* the descendants of Abraham for a purpose. To save them, and damn the nations? No! The goal was to bless the nations. God chose Abraham's family as the bearers of the blessing, not the exclusive beneficiaries. God's plan was to benefit the world, not condemn it. And it worked. It was through a son of Abraham (Jesus) that God's plan came together for the world, the plan he has been working on all along.

The destination God set from the start—what he had *predestined*—was the rescue of humanity from oppression under evil, back into his governance, in his *Chosen One*, Jesus our Lord.

The whole plan God implemented across the millennia comes together in the person of Jesus. When you see the Biblical narrative as God's story fulfilled in Jesus, then:

- **Predestination** means God pre-planning the destination for his earthly realm, namely its return to his sovereign management through the ruler he appointed (Jesus Christ our Lord).
- **Election** means God choosing people to represent him, people through whom he works to restore the blessing of his sovereign authority over the earth in Jesus our Lord.
- **The sovereignty of God** means God is earth's rightful ruler, and his sovereign reign (the kingdom of God) is restored in his earthly realm through Jesus, his anointed.

Let's see how that approach works with a familiar passage about predestination and election. We'll make three passes through this text.

First, here's a paraphrase of how it has been misread as God's sovereign power to save and damn individuals:

Ephesians 1:4-10, paraphrased as God saving/damning individuals:

⁴ When he created the world, God had already elected us as the individuals to save (implying he always intended to damn the non-elect). He chose us to be the ones who are holy and blameless in his sight. ⁵ He predestined us and adopted us through Jesus Christ for no reason except that it pleased him to do so (i.e. it had nothing to do with our choice). ⁶ It's only about his glory,

dependent only on his grace freely given to the ones he chose to include in the Chosen One. ⁷⁻⁸ In him, we have been redeemed through his substitutionary blood sacrificed to forgive our guilty acts. Again this had nothing to do with us; it was all the result of the generous grace he extended to the elect on the basis of his own wisdom and knowledge. ⁹⁻¹⁰ We cannot understand why he chose us and rejected others; it's purely to do with his purpose (nothing to do with us), the plan he always had to save the elect through Christ at the time he intended to reconcile the elect to himself.

Now the same passage, read as the story of our sovereign faithfully working out his plan to restore his earthly realm under his governance through his designated ruler:

Ephesians 1:4-10, paraphrased God's plan for humanity finding fulfilment in Christ:

⁴ When God first fathered humanity in his image, he chose us to represent his devoted and blameless character in his earthly realm. ⁵ As an act of love, God pre-planned to return us to sonship by incorporating us into Jesus the Messiah. ⁶⁻⁸ How amazing is that! In him, through his death, we humans are emancipated from slavery, released from transgressions against God's reign, just because God lavishes his generosity on us. ⁸⁻¹⁰ With all the wisdom in the world, God revealed what his good character had intended all along. It all came to light in the Messiah when the time was right: the reunification of everything in heaven and on earth, under the management of his anointed ruler.

Finally, here is the text from the New International Version. Read carefully, comparing each verse with the paraphrases above. Which story is it telling? A story about God assigning destinies to individuals? Or a story about God achieving what he planned—the restoration of his earthly realm to his sovereign governance, through his Anointed?

Ephesians 1:4-10 (NIV)

⁴ He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

Our personal destinies certainly flow out of what Jesus did for us. But don't shrivel the gospel into a story about me when it's the story of how Jesus fulfilled God's plans.

Kingdom or Church? (Eph 1:18-23)

How come the epistles talk more about church than kingdom?

Kingdom was Jesus' priority, the restoration of God's reign. But when we turn to the epistles, there's more about church than kingdom. Why?

The church doesn't seem to measure up to Jesus' kingdom ideal. It's almost like, "Jesus preached the kingdom, but what we got was the church."¹

We need to re-establish the connection between church and kingdom. The connection is Jesus. The head of the church is the king of the kingdom.

Because Jesus is king, the church's mission is his kingdom mission:

- The church is the community that models life under Jesus' kingship, so the rest of the world sees their king.
- The church is the corporate presence (body) of the prince anointed by God to reign over the earth (head).
- The church is the cultural alternative to power-crushed fractured humanity. It's the new humanity being raised up in the resurrected king.
- The church is his queen, the bride invited into the life and reign of the king.

You see something less than this when you look at the church? Then please join me in this prayer to rediscover our calling as the people embodying the culture and resurrection life of the king:

¹⁸ May the eyes of our communal heart be enlightened to perceive the hope infused in us by God's call, to realize the richness of God's glorious character imaged in his holy people as the inheritance he always intended for humanity, ¹⁹ to see the surpassing greatness of his power in the community that gives allegiance to the outworking of his mighty reign.

²⁰ We saw the outworking of his sovereign power in his Anointed: raising him out of death, enthroning him beside himself in his heavenly realm. ²¹ God set his Anointed far above every hierarchy, authority, power, and rulership—far above every name people call on, not only in the present, but in the era he is bringing into existence.

²² God placed everything under the feet of his Anointed, giving him headship over the whole assembly [church], ²³ the community that is his corporate presence [body], where he is fully present and becoming everything to everyone.

(based on Ephesians 1:18-23)

Let's keep praying this until we see the church as the community where the king is present, the embodied presence of the resurrected king in the world entrusted to his care.

The church has a kingdom calling because the king's resurrected life is our life.

¹ Alfred Loisy, *l'Evangile et l'Eglise*, 1902, 111.

Excursus: why “church”?

Ekklēsia is a strange word for early Christians to choose for church. It was used for political gatherings, not religious ones. They had words for religious meetings (*synagōgē*) or general gatherings (e.g. *sullogos*). Why *ekklēsia*?

Meaning is always determined by how the word was used, not by its derivation:

First, avoid the danger of becoming “derivation happy.” To put it simply, to know the etymology, or root, of a word, however interesting it may be, almost *never* tells us anything about its meaning in a given context. For example, the word ἐκκλησία (church) indeed derives from ἐκ + καλέω (“to call out from”), but by the time of the NT that is *not* within its range of meanings. And in any case, NT usage had already been determined by its prior use in the LXX, where it was consistently used to translate the term “the congregation” of Israel. Therefore, it does not mean “the called-out ones” in any NT context.²

It’s odd enough to choose this word for a local church meeting, such as “the *ekklēsia* that meets in your home” (Philemon 2). But it’s beyond odd to use this word for something that is not a local assembly, such as “the *ekklēsia* throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria” (Acts 9:31).

How did this usage arise? Let’s start with what *ekklēsia* meant before Christians borrowed it.

In the Greek world, an *ekklēsia* was a political assembly:

In classical Greek as well as in Hellenistic literature, it became a technical expression for the assembly of the people, consisting of free men entitled to vote.³

Ekklēsia has this sense in Acts 19. The silversmiths of Ephesus feared they’d be ruined if people believed Paul’s message and no longer wanted idols, so they orchestrated an assembly (*ekklēsia*) in defence of their local god:

Acts 19 ³² The **assembly** was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. ... ³⁵ The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: ... ³⁹ “If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal **assembly**.” ... ⁴¹ After he had said this, he dismissed the **assembly**. (NIV)

In the Jewish world, *ekklēsia* meant a secular assembly too. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek (the LXX), they used *synagōgē* for religious meetings and *ekklēsia* for political or secular assemblies:

In the LXX ἐκκλησία is a wholly secular term.⁴

Ekklēsia turns up most often in post-exilic books like Chronicles, where it usually refers to an assembly gathered around the king:

² Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 79–80.

³ Balz, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* 1:411.

⁴ Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 3:527.

1 Chronicles 13 ² [David] said to the whole **assembly** of Israel, ... ³ “Let us bring the ark of our God back ...” ⁴ The whole **assembly** agreed to do this, because it seemed right to all the people. (NIV)

1 Chronicles 29 ¹ Then King David said to the whole **assembly** ...

¹⁰ David praised the LORD in the presence of the whole **assembly**, ...

²⁰ Then David said to the whole **assembly**, “Praise the LORD your God.” So they all praised the LORD, the God of their fathers; they bowed down, prostrating themselves before the LORD and the king. (NIV)

So *ekklēsia* is a political term, but Israel had no concept of separating church and state. The king was the anointed representative of the LORD. So if the king was doing his job, he directed the attention of the *ekklēsia* that gathered around him towards their true sovereign.

Now, Chronicles paints a somewhat idealized picture of David and Solomon, minimizing their mistakes and emphasizing what they did right. You can understand why: this is after the exile, when Israel has fallen in a hole, and the Chronicler’s agenda promotes the restoration of “all Israel” (x 47 times). They long for the restoration of Israel as the nation under divine reign, led by God’s anointed (the Davidic king). This king would *gather* the scattered nation back together as *one* people under *one* king, a united *assembly* under YHWH—the way it used to be when a son of David ruled:

2 Chronicles 6 ³ While the whole **assembly** of Israel was standing there, the king turned around and blessed them. ...

¹² Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the whole

assembly of Israel and spread out his hands. ¹³ ... He stood on the platform and then knelt down before the whole **assembly** of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven. (NIV)

Do these examples of how *ekklēsia* was used in the Jewish world provide clues as to why the first Christians adopted the word?

Theologians regularly puzzle over the relationship between *the kingdom of God* and *the church*. But what if early Christians understood the significance of Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom of God, recognized him as the king (Lord, ruler, anointed), and chose a political word to describe how they gathered around the king?

That would explain not only the use of a political word for a local gathering. Since the resurrected and ascended king is not limited to one location, it would also be the perfect word to describe the assembly of King Jesus as a phenomenon spread around the globe.

If that’s right, it could shape our understanding of what the church is and what we’re meant to do. *Church* becomes less about meeting for an hour each week, and more about the people who implement the reign of King Jesus in his world, functioning together to care for people our king cares for, to ensure no one misses out, to release the captives into life under his reign, so the poor receive the kingdom, the crushed are comforted, and the meek inherit the earth.

What picture do you see when you hear the word *church*? The assembly of people who inhabit God’s reign, under his anointed, the people who reunite as humanity under his kingship?

Ephesians 2

In Christ: humanity restored (Eph 2:1–10)

What we are in Christ—it's more than we think.

Many people love Ephesians for the way it explains who we are *in Christ*. That phrase (or *in him*) turns up 20 times in the first three chapters.

But if the phrase has you thinking about your personal identity, you've barely scratched the surface. Ephesians makes a gigantic claim: God is restoring the broken fragments of humanity, bringing us all together into communal life under King Jesus.

Imagine a world released from its dead existence under evil, raised to life in God's anointed, participating in his resurrected life as he restores us all into community under his kingship.

Don't miss the scope by reading it as a story about me. For example, Ephesians 2 opens with *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins ...*

I hear you. Your guilt kicks in and you respond, "Yep, that's me. I was dead in my ..."

But that's not the response the writer wanted:

- *You* is plural. He was thinking of a defunct community, crushed under evil.
- In verse 3, *you* suddenly switches to *we*. No, the writer attempting empathy, naming himself as a guilty individual. The sense of the whole chapter rests on picking up the difference between the two groups—*you* and *we*.

Intrigued?

Before Jesus, the world was divided into two groups from God's perspective. The nations that were far from divine kingship because they had gone their own way (Genesis 10). And then there was God's nation, Abraham's descendants, rescued from Pharaoh's oppression and established under God's kingship by the Sinai covenant. While God had always promised to reign over everyone (the covenant of Genesis 9), God had let the nations go their way, concentrating on Israel as the nation that represented him.

This all changed when Jesus arrived. The rebellion against God's kingship reached its full measure when the leaders of God's nation handed him over to be slaughtered by their oppressors. This collusion to assassinate God's anointed revealed the extent of the rebellion against God: Israel and the nations were all dead under evil, instead of living under God.

These are the two groups in Ephesians 2. Ephesus was in Western Turkey. A Jewish writer found it perfectly natural to address gentiles as *you*, and refer to his own people as *we*.

You (gentiles), he says, were far from God, stuck in death by the rebellion against God's kingship. But we Jews were too. Both groups colluded against God to crucify his anointed (compare Acts 4:27), bringing Jesus down into the death we shared.

But look what God did! When God raised him up out of death, Jesus had brought both warring groups together in his own being. His resurrection is therefore the end of hostilities against God and the end of the fragmentation of humanity (verses 11–22).

So here's Ephesians 2:1-10, expanded to help us catch the message:

Ephesians 2 (an interpretative translation)

¹You who were not part of the covenant in Old Testament times were already dead, stuck in the long-standing rebellion and disobedience to the heavenly king. ²You had a zombie-like existence during the era dominated by this world—dead things under the control of a ruler with authority from something less than Heaven, the spirit that still drives those born into the rebellion.

³We Jews lived the same way back then. We were stuck in our broken nature's cravings for power, captive to the scheming desires in our body and mind. We made God just as angry as the nations did, because we were descendants of human brokenness too. ⁴But we have a heavenly sovereign who overflows with mercy for his broken people. Just look at the extent of his love, his love reaching out to us in his Son. ⁵And since we (the whole Israel nation) had died in the rebellion against God, he plugged us into his Anointed and brought us back to life in him. We were rescued out of death by our sovereign's generosity—⁶co-raised out of death, and co-enthroned with King Jesus in his heavenly appointment. ⁷God did this to show the coming eras the extraordinary richness of his generosity, the regal kindness extended to us by giving us King Jesus.

⁸For it is by his generosity that you people of the nations are being rescued, through his faithfulness. The rescue doesn't come from you; it is God's gift, ⁹nothing you've achieved, nothing you can brag about.

¹⁰For we together are the product of God's work, the artistry he created in King Jesus, the community living productively, the way God always intended humans to live.

Does this expand your appreciation of what *salvation* means—God's rescue mission, bringing everyone back together in the reign of his Anointed?

Does it help you find your place in Christ, how you participate in his restorative mission?

Does it shape the work of the church, as the community living in King Jesus (in Christ)?

What difference does the resurrection make? (Eph 2:5-6)

How does Jesus' resurrection make a difference for humanity?

The resurrection is the moment in history when everything changed, for everyone.

Jesus was not the first to be put to death unjustly. That kind of thing happens every day. One of Judah's kings is said to have filled Jerusalem with innocent blood (2 Kings 21:16).

What was unique in Jesus' case was what happened three days later. When they went to wrap his dead body with spices, it wasn't there. God had intervened. Earthly courts had authorized his execution, but a higher court exonerated him and restored him.

Do you see how radical this is? Human rulers gain power by subjugating their opponents. They conduct wars, tearing each other apart like wild beasts. But on the third day, the Ancient of Days (our eternal ruler) broke death's hold. He gave the kingdom to someone who was not like a beast but like a human—one like a son of man (Daniel 7).

For over a month, Jesus shared life with his friends. Then he ascended to heaven's throne, where he reigns over the earth, seated the right hand of the majesty on high.

So what difference does the resurrection make to us? Ephesians 2 provides a graphic answer.

It begins by picturing the whole of humanity under the power of evil and death. The reason people do so much damage to each other is that we walk around under the control of our broken humanity, the consequence of rebellion against our heavenly king. But the problem goes beyond our human brokenness (flesh): we are slaves of evil spiritual powers, including death. Humanity lives a zombie-like existence: dead people walking around under evil control, doing terrible things to each other. Yes, that's graphic, but can you relate?

So what does God do? He becomes one of us, joining us in our mortal existence. There's no surprise when the zombies, under the control of evil, kill him. But just as he chose to be in humanity, humanity is "in him" when God raises him from the dead! That's why the resurrection changes everything not just for Jesus, but for us.

The heart of Ephesians 2 is this "together" connection between Jesus and humanity. It's captured with three specially coined words in verses 5-6:

- When he was brought to life, humanity was brought to life with him (*sygkathizō*).
- When he was raised up, humanity was raised up with him (*synegeirō*).
- When he was enthroned, humanity was enthroned with him (*sygkathizō*).

The resurrection changed everything for Jesus, but it changed everything for us too. No longer are we the walking dead under the control of evil. Humanity came back to life *with him*. Humanity was raised out of death *with him*. Humanity's original vocation to reign over God's world is restored because we are raised up to reign *with him*.

Celebration! Easter Sunday day changed everything forever. We were *in him* when he was brought to life, raised up, and enthroned.

That makes Jesus the foundation for a new humanity—a humanity no longer divided. In him, we are reconciled to God and to each other (2:11-18). And since God dwelt in him, we who are in him are God's dwelling too (2:19-20):

- The whole human edifice is joined together in him (*synarmologeomai*).
- Humanity is being built together (*synoikodomomai*) as a house for God.

Did you notice that all 5 of those verbs begin with "sy(n)" meaning together? God joined us in our brokenness, our death. He was *together with us* when he rose. That's why the resurrection changes our world, changes history, changes where we're headed.

In him, God's kingship over the earth has been restored in him.

What others are saying

John Stott:

In fact he coins three verbs, which take up what God did to Christ and then (by the addition of the prefix *syn*, ‘together with’) link us to Christ in these events. Thus first, God *made us alive together with Christ* (verse 5), next he *raised us up with him* (verse 6a), and thirdly he *made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus* (verse 6b). ... He is affirming not that God quickened, raised and seated Christ, but that he quickened, raised and seated us with Christ. Fundamental to New Testament Christianity is this concept of the union of God’s people with Christ.⁵

N. T. Wright:

Having told the story of the sovereign God and of Jesus as an exodus-narrative (1:3–14) and as the story of this God’s victory in the Messiah over all the powers of the world (1:20–23), Paul now tells the story of how humankind has been brought from universal death to life in the Messiah (2:1–10, focused on 2:5–6). The present state of those in the Messiah is that they have already been ‘raised with the Messiah’ and seated with him in the heavenly places; what is true of the Messiah in 1:20–23, in other words, is true of those who are ‘in him’.⁶

God’s kingdom and salvation (Eph 2:8–9)

How does the kingdom of God relate to the message of salvation?

In my student days, I stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon. It’s embarrassing, but I remember saying, “That’s not a canyon; that’s a huge cliff.” I expected to see another cliff on the other side of the canyon. Eventually, somebody pointed it out: “See over there, 18 miles in the distance, that’s the other side.” I had totally failed to understand the scale of the canyon.

Salvation can be a bit like that. It’s so much more than we take in at first. For 500 years, we’ve stressed that it’s all of grace, nothing of human merit: by grace alone, by faith alone. We know it so well:

Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)

⁸ For it is by **grace** you have been saved, through **faith**—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

How does salvation relate to the kingdom? That’s an important question if we are to understand the gospel Jesus preached, i.e. the good news of the kingdom (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 24:14; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:43; 8:1; 16:16).

⁵ John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 80–81

⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, (London: SPCK, 2003), 237.

The *gospel of the kingdom* is the good news of reconciliation between heaven and earth. It's the amazing story God's faithfulness, resolving the rebellion against his kingship. *Grace* and *faith* are indeed the keywords defining the two sides of that story:

- Heaven takes the initiative to make peace. That's *grace*.
- Earth responds with allegiance to the king. That's *faith*.

In more detail:

- **Heaven's initiative (grace):** God gave us the gift of his eternal Son who rescues us back into God's sovereign care. The Son purified the earth from sin, i.e. from its rebellion against its true heavenly sovereign. The rebellion (sin) was overthrown when God raised up his anointed ruler (Christ) from death to kingship. The good news (gospel) is the proclamation, "He is Lord" (earth's divinely appointed ruler).
- **Earth's response (faith):** Earth-dwellers are called to give their loyalty (trust) to King Jesus and live as he commands (under his Lordship). He calls us to cease doing violence against each other and against God, to love God and love people. He restores us to our human vocation as images of our heavenly king, so creation is the kingdom of God.

Grace is the amnesty offered by the king to his rebellious realm. *Faith* is the trust in his kingship that finds expression in love for God and people.

Without the kingdom story, *grace* and *faith* can seem insipid. Salvation can be presented as "Just raise your hand and accept the free gift, just between you and God" as if it makes no difference to your life or connection to others. With the kingdom framework, you are called to respond to the reconciling initiative of the king (grace) by giving him allegiance (faith).

This survey can't do justice to these majestic themes. For serious, fresh, quality scholarship on grace and faith respectively, read:

- John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Eerdmans, 2015)
- Matthew Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Baker Academic, 2017)

Or, read the Bible as the kingdom story. When we treat God badly (the rebellion of Genesis 3), we treat each other badly too (the murder of Genesis 4). When we give God his rightful place (love God), we do right to each other as well (love people). Doing justly and loving mercy are connected to walking humbly with our divine sovereign (Micah 6:8).

The kingdom of God is acknowledging God as king, and so living with others as his kingdom. The one who lives in heaven is king, and the ones who live on earth are his kingdom. Salvation does not disconnect those two things; it reconnects them. Through the divine initiative, earth is restored where it belongs—under heaven's authority.

Galatians 6:7–10 (NLT)

⁷Don't be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. ⁸Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. ⁹So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of

blessing if we don't give up.¹⁰ Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone—especially to those in the family of faith.

Salvation is God rescuing us from the kingdom of darkness, into the kingdom of his Son.

What others are saying

John M.G. Barclay:

What distinguishes the sphere of gift is not that it is “unilateral,” but that it expresses a social bond, a mutual recognition of the value of the person. It is filled with sentiment because it invites a personal, enduring, and reciprocal relationship—an ethos very often signaled by the use of the term *charis* (grace).⁷

Matthew W. Bates:

The context in which this passage is situated pertains specifically to entering true life (“enter through the narrow gate!”—7:13), a warning against false prophets (“by their fruit you will recognize them!”—7:16), and the necessity of putting Jesus’s words into practice (“everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock”—7:24). So the point in context is that even those who have confessed Jesus as Lord and who claim (on the basis of their own questionable testimony) to have performed good works in Jesus’s name may not have truly enacted fidelity to Jesus as Lord. Notice Jesus calls them “workers of lawlessness,” meaning their wicked practices are at issue. Professed allegiance is not sufficient; the allegiance must be realized by genuine, albeit not perfect, obedience.⁸

Christopher Wright:

Put it another way round. What was the problem that God solved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Some people talk (and preach, and teach, and sing songs) as if the *only* problem is “me and my sin.” That is a problem, of course. Without Christ I stand condemned as a sinner with no hope and no eternal future with God. Because of Christ and his death in my place, I can indeed know that God forgives me and that I can be sure of eternal salvation. Good news! I believe it! But if that is the *only* way we think and speak about the gospel, we make it entirely self-centred. It’s all about me, my sin, and my salvation. But that is making the gospel far narrower than the Bible itself. And it is surely strange and wrong to be self-centred in thinking about the gospel, which is God’s great plan for the whole of creation.⁹

⁷ John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

⁸ Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Baker Academic, 2017) 99.

⁹ Christopher Wright: *How to Preach and Teach the Old Testament for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016)

Good news of peace (Eph 2:11-22)

It was a day in 1945 my Mum remembered vividly. She was a teenager working in a pharmacy in Roma (Qld) when a great hullabaloo broke out. People were dancing and hugging in the streets. Cars honked, making jubilation laps in the street. Joy swept through the whole town at the news, “The war is over!”

We have a message that’s even greater. Jesus is the end of hostilities on earth!

Have you heard the good news?

When people refused divine governance (Genesis 3), the human community was fragmented by violence (Genesis 4). Kingdoms were built on war, kingdoms like Babylon and Assyria (Genesis 10:8-12). The reign of evil saw the nation that represented God being decimated by the kingdoms of the world.

Into this war-zone, Jesus came announcing good news: the restoration of God’s reign (Mark 1:15). But how was that possible? In the history of empires, the “baddest” beast wins. How could a Jewish prophet in an occupied land overpower the beasts? It would take an act of God for the kingdom to be taken from the beasts and given to someone who refused to gain power like that—someone more human, *like a son of man* (Daniel 7:13-14).

But behave like a human in the face of the beasts and they’ll tear you apart. Jesus knew. He knew it would take divine intervention to receive the kingship that way. Death and divine intervention—that’s what he expected:

Mark 9 ³¹ He said to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”

What Jesus did was absorb the hostilities in his own being. Earth’s divinely appointed ruler (Christ) stands up in the face of the hostilities against God and against each other, taking the full weight and violence of human sin on himself.

The Gospels describe how the rulers of God’s fallen nation collude with the power of empire to be rid of “the king of the Jews.” Instead of fighting back, Jesus lodges a plea for reconciliation: “Father, forgive them: they do not realize what they’re doing” (Luke 23:34). His prayer is answered: he carries away in his own body the sin of the world, the world’s resistance to God’s governance.

That’s when God took the kingship from the beasts and gave it the human. God raised him up, defeating the power of death. No longer is earth longer ruled by evil (the power of sin). The eternal ruler gave the kingship to the son of man. With all authority in heaven and on earth, King Jesus calls the nations to follow him, their Commander-in-chief (Matthew 28:18-19).

Good news! The war is over! The Christ has ended the old divisions —one nation as “God’s people” and other nations as “not God’s people.” It’s the end of hostilities. King Jesus is bringing people of all nations together into a single unified humanity in him.

Ephesians 2:11–22 (an interpretive translation)

¹¹ So, remember how you who come from other nations were called “the uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcised” (since they see physical cutting as the marker of who’s in the covenant people). ¹² Back then, you were not included in God’s anointed King. You were alienated from

citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenant promise of divine kingship, outside the hope of God's reign over the world. ¹³ But now, in King Jesus, you who were remote from all this became participants—through the slaughter of God's anointed!

¹⁴ For he is our **peace**; forming a new union from both parties. In his physical person, he dismantled the hostility that divided humanity into covenant and non-covenant people. ¹⁵ God's law and commands (the Sinai covenant decrees) exposed the division between the two groups, but King Jesus dismantled that division, creating one unified humanity out of the two human divisions. He did this in his own being: in his role as ruler of all people, he made peace.

¹⁶ In his own body, he completely reconciled both human groups by drawing them both together to God, unified through his cross—within his own being, killing off the hostility. ¹⁷ Then he came back and announced the good news: **peace** for you who were remote, and **peace** for the ones who were near. ¹⁸ Through him, both groups are unified in one Spirit, so we have access to the Father.

¹⁹ That means you non-Jews are no longer foreigners and aliens but equal citizens, included in the holy people, with a place in God's households, ²⁰ the households built upon the founding work of the apostles (appointed by Jesus) and the prophets (who previously announced the word of the Lord), King Jesus being the crucial building block where the whole thing comes together.

²¹ In him, the whole building is being assembled as it develops into the Lord's holy temple-residence, ²² with you all being co-assembled into God's dwelling-place by the Spirit.

Time for dancing in the streets?

Excursus: Questions take you deeper (Eph 2)

Here's an example of how asking good questions leads to a richer appreciation of what God is doing.

When you read Scripture, what are you looking for? It's not enough to approach the Bible like a shopping trip, to pick up some things that appeal to you. The Bible changes us. It's the revelation of the God who is reshaping us into community in his image.

Questions help open us to that transformation, beyond the way we currently think and live. Rich communal understanding and life grows from asking good questions together.

Previously we discussed Ephesians 2:1: *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.* We asked, "Who is the *you*?" The tendency is to assume it's *me*, because our culture is individualistic. But *you* is plural, so perhaps it's *us*? But two verses later, the writer switches from *you* to *us*. Turns out he's using *we* to mean his own people (fellow Jews), and addressing people of other nations (gentiles) as *you*.

That leads to another question. What were the *transgressions and sins* of the gentiles? The sins of the Jewish nation could be any violations of the law God gave them at Sinai, but how were gentiles disobedient to God?

From a Jewish perspective, there are some indications that the sins of the nations are primarily acts of violence. It was violence that corrupted humanity even before Abraham (Genesis 6:11). So God issued an anti-violence command to everyone, in the context of God's covenant commitment to never give up ruling us all, no matter how hard we are to manage (Genesis 9:4-17). Kingdoms are built through war: we're introduced to that idea at the heart of the chapter on the nations (Genesis 10:8-12).

In Ephesians 2:1, the parallel word for sins is *transgressions*. Transgressing means overstepping a boundary. In Hebrew thought, everything, including the existence of the nations, is decreed by God: "The Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples" (Deuteronomy 32:8). But since the nations do not recognize the authority of the one who gave them their lands, they conduct wars to gain more—*transgressing* the boundaries he set.

Most significantly, the nations' transgressions include their failure to honour the boundaries God set for Jacob's descendants (Deuteronomy 32:9). Israel lost the Promised Land when Assyria took the north and Babylon took what left (2 Kings 17, 25). The *sins* of the nations are clear: they *transgressed* the boundaries set by God, decimating the entire Abraham project.

As an exile in Babylon, Ezekiel was distraught that there was nothing left. "The end! The end has come," he grieved (Ezekiel 8:2). What had been the Holy Land was defiled with the bones of dead soldiers, slaughtered by the sins of the nations (Assyria and Babylon). With no one to bury them, the dead bones lay in the open, bleached by the sin, visible symbols of the death of God's nation.

But the Sovereign LORD—the eternal sovereign who rules the whole earth, even after the Davidic kingship had ceased representing him—had a message for his human servant. Even though the transgressions and sins of the nations had destroyed Israel, God would yet breathe life into the dead bones. The whole dead corporate entity would rise again (Ezekiel 37:9-14). Miraculously, this applied to both houses of Israel: the Joseph tribes destroyed by Assyria's transgression in 722 BC, and Judah destroyed by Babylon's transgression in 587. This resurrection would reunite the kingdom that divided when Solomon died (1 Kings 12). God would raise up a single nation from two parts (Ezekiel 37:15-23), with one Davidic king to lead them (37:24-25), as a covenant of peace (37:26), with a restored temple/dwelling of God (37:27), so the nations know the LORD (37:28).

Did you recognize it? Ephesians 2 unfolds exactly along the lines of Ezekiel 37. It starts with the transgressions and sins of the nations, and the associated death of the covenant people (Ephesians 2:3). But God resurrected his covenant people in his anointed, in the resurrection of the Davidic Messiah (2:4-7). Miraculously, God even resurrected the dead nations in the Messiah, even though their efforts had contributed nothing useful at all (2:11-13). So God did much more than reconcile the two houses of Israel: he established a peace covenant with everyone—Jews and gentiles, the warring divisions of humanity. God is building both groups into a single new restored humanity, in the Messiah who is the chief cornerstone of the whole project, the temple where God lives among humans (2:19-22).

In summary, Ephesians 2 explains how the valley-of-dry-bones-prophecy is fulfilled in the Messiah. For further detail, see “[The Use of Ezekiel 37 in Ephesians 2](#)” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50:4 (2007): 714–733.

So how did we get to this insight into Ephesians 2? It started with a question—a question that moved us beyond what the text might mean for “me,” a question that led us into the astounding message called *the gospel of peace*—the good news of Jesus reconciling all the peoples of the earth to God and to each other, in himself.

Ask questions that go beyond *me*, to who God is and what he is doing.

Excursus: the gospel of peace

Gospel of peace? A beatnik fabrication? A substitute for serious doctrine?

Actually, it’s in the Bible. I can see how peace would be good news for the world, but how is that the gospel?

There was this Macedonian guy named Alexander who wanted to rule the world. He formed an army and led them east from Greece, all the way to Iran. His was a simple strategy: submit to my power, or die. Did he unify the world and provide peace?

There was this Roman guy named Julius. His armies swept through Europe conquering everything from Britain to Palestine. His PR machine announced, “Good news! *Pax Romana*”—the peace imposed by Rome.

Repeat ad nauseam, across the globe, through history. Powerful rulers force themselves on people, dealing death to those who resist. War never delivers peace.

There was this Jewish guy named Jesus. He had no army, and he never dealt death to anyone. He identified as a servant of a higher power, dealing life instead of death, healing instead of harming, blessing instead of woes. He was *good news* for those who’d missed out (poor), liberation for captives, the restoration of God’s favour to his world (Luke 4:18-19).

He called it *the gospel of the kingdom of God* (Luke 4:43; 8:1; 16:16)—the good news of a just world under God’s reign, earth becoming what Heaven intended. Heaven called it **good news** that will cause great joy for all the people ... **peace** on earth (Luke 2:10, 14).

Don’t picture *the gospel of peace* as tranquil inner feelings, an escape from guilt and anxiety. Jesus never tried to escape. In the face of the oppressed world, he was good news from God, drawing conflicted people together in his kingship:

Acts 10 ³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the **good news of peace** through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. (NIV)

So, *the gospel of peace* is a person. And the good news of peace was not just for those who had been God’s nation before Jesus. All the peoples of the earth are reunified in his government.

Other rulers used war as a means to an end, but only Jesus is the end of war:

Ephesians 2 ¹⁴ He himself is our **peace**, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... ¹⁵ His purpose

was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making **peace**,¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.¹⁷ He came and preached **peace** to you who were far away and **peace** to those who were near. (NIV)

Unlike Alexander the Macedonian or Julius from Rome, Jesus' peace is not an imposed peace. It is the good news of peace that comes from a totally different source: not through people dealing death to their enemies (war) but through God dealing life to the ruler who reunites humanity (resurrection).

That's the good news of peace for the world. So how does the world get reunited in God's anointed ruler (in Christ)? Those of us who give allegiance to God's anointed are called to enact the good news of peace in every community where we live:

Ephesians 6¹⁵ Have your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from **the gospel of peace**. (NIV)

Enacting *the gospel of peace* is not joining protest rallies to pressure governments. That's a form of idolatry, a misguided hope in human governments to give us lasting peace. Lasting peace comes only as we enact the peace of the one who truly rules in our communities.

But the gospel of peace cannot be reduced to individuals making personal decisions. Yes, it is about each person responding (because it's not an imposed peace), but individualism cannot bring peace. The gospel of peace requires us to live as the community that expresses how our King cares for us in the way we care for each other, especially those who have been missing out. The gospel of peace changes everything: the way we argue with our spouse, the way we relate to our neighbours, the way we share our resources.

The gospel of peace isn't a doctrine; it's a lifestyle, a lifestyle based on the cross.

C'mon church. It's time to get these shoes on.

Ephesians 3

The apocalyptic framework of Ephesians 3

Same apocalyptic problem (mystery); unexpectedly awesome answer (reveal).

After Babylon invaded Jerusalem and terminated the Davidic kingship, Israel was ruled by other nations. Floating adrift among the nations, they clung to their ancient stories of how God had delivered them from Pharaoh's tyranny, committing himself to be the sovereign of their nation (covenant), giving them his wise law (Torah), and living among them to lead them (tabernacle).

But generations of Jacob's descendants remained under foreign domination, rising and dying like the grass of the field. As nations fought and conquered each other, as empires rose and fell, Israel remained the meat in their sandwich.

They wondered how God would resolve this injustice. When would the day of the Lord arrive? How would the sovereign Lord overpower the evil that oppressed them and destroy the power of the nations?

The *Similitudes of Enoch* provides insight into how some first-century Jews imagined it would work out when God revealed his answer to this mystery:

1 Enoch 62 ² The word of his mouth will do the sinners in; and **all the oppressors shall be eliminated** from before his face. ³ On the day of judgment, all the kings, the governors, the high officials, and the landlords shall see and recognize him—how he sits on the throne of his glory, and righteousness is judged before him ...

⁴ Then **pain shall come upon them** as on a woman in travail with birth pangs—when she is giving birth (the child) enters the mouth of the womb and she suffers from childbearing. ⁵ One half portion of them shall glance at the other half; they shall be terrified and dejected; and pain shall seize them when they see that Son of Man sitting on the throne of his glory. ⁶ (These) kings, governors, and all the landlords shall (try to) bless, glorify, extol him who rules over everything, him who has been concealed.

⁷ For the **Son of Man** was **concealed** from the beginning, and the Most High One preserved him in the presence of his power; then he **revealed** him to the holy and the elect ones. ⁸ The congregation of the holy ones shall be planted, and all the elect ones shall stand before him. ⁹ On that day, all the kings, the governors, the high officials, and those who rule the earth shall fall down before him on their faces, and worship and raise their hopes in that Son of Man; they shall beg and plead for mercy at his feet. ¹⁰ But the Lord of the Spirits himself will cause them to be frantic, so that they shall rush and depart from his presence. Their faces shall be filled with shame, and their countenances shall be crowned with darkness. ¹¹ So he will deliver them to the

angels for punishments in order that **vengeance shall be executed on them**—oppressors of his children and his elect ones. ...

¹³ The righteous and elect ones shall be saved on that day; and from thenceforth **they shall never see the faces of the sinners and the oppressors.**¹⁰

1 Enoch reflects the hope expressed in Daniel 7, the hope that one day Israel's God would give the kingship to one like a Son of Man. The Enoch community imagined this would mean judgement for the rulers who oppressed them.

Note the apocalyptic language of *concealed / revealed*. Enoch says the identity of God's appointed ruler (the Son of Man) had been *concealed* from the world's rulers, so God could *reveal* him at the right time. This *mystery-to-be-revealed* is the essence of apocalyptic—a word that literally means the reveal, the revelation.

But when God finally did reveal his Messiah, things were vastly different to what the Enoch community imagined. They imagined the revelation of God's appointed ruler would mean the destruction of those who currently rule, so God's people never again "see the faces of their oppressors."

Ephesians 3 depicts a very different reveal. Instead of warring against and destroying the nations for their transgressions, God's anointed Messiah incorporated the nations into his rule! They expected God to pour bowls of caustic wrath on the nations, but God revealed astounding benevolence by incorporating them in the Messiah's reign!

That's what **grace** is: the unexpected regal benevolence of the heavenly sovereign for the people of his earthly realm, the unimaginably generous character of our heavenly king towards his own nation and the nations who had resisted his reign.

That's the reveal Ephesians gives. Before the Messiah was revealed, God's world was divided: one nation under his kingship; other nations out for their own power. Driven by dark forces beyond themselves, the nations around Israel overstepped their boundaries, took Israel's land, and terminated the Davidic kingship. In doing so, they brought everyone (Israel included) under the reign of sin and death (Ephesians 2:1-3). But the heavenly sovereign's extreme benevolence (grace) saved the nations and Israel from this death, by raising his anointed from death to the throne (2:4-9). As a result, everything changed. The old animosities are over, as the Messiah forms a whole new unified humanity in himself. The nations receive citizenship in the people of God (2:10-18). In the Messiah, all earth-dwellers together (Israel and the nations) are being formed into the house where God is present and reigning (2:19-22).

When God finally did reveal how he would solve the problem of the nations, it turned out that Enoch and the apocalypists had seriously underestimated divine benevolence. The reveal—in the person of the Messiah—gave the most unexpected answer to the mystery.

¹⁰ James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (New York; London: Yale University Press, 1983), 43–44.

Here it is:

Ephesians 3 (interpretative translation)

² Surely you heard about the commission of God's benevolence given to me to benefit you who come from other nations, ³ the reveal he made known to me as the answer to the mystery of what God would do with the nations. ...

⁶ Through the Good News of the Messiah's kingship, the nations are co-inheritors, co-joined corporately, co-beneficiaries of the promise God fulfilled in Messiah Jesus, through the Good News of his restored kingship.

⁷ As a gift of God's benevolence, I became his public servant, empowered to function with the power of his government. ⁸ To me—someone of the least significance among all God's holy subjects—was given this magnanimous appointment: to announce to the nations the good news of the Messiah's unfathomable generosity, ⁹ to bring to light the management of the mystery concealed in previous ages, concealed in the character of the God who created it all.

Gospel. Grace. Salvation. Familiar words jump to life as the good news of Jesus restoring God's kingship to earth (the gospel of the kingdom), the astounding benevolence of our divine sovereign's character (grace), and the rescue of Jacob's descendants in combination with the nations that previously oppressed them in the reign of sin and death, into life under restored divine kingship of God's whole world (salvation).

Does this gospel enthuse you? What a reveal to the mystery of the ages!

Making sense of suffering when Christ is king (Eph 3:1)

According to Ephesians, the good news of King Jesus is transforming the world:

- God's long-term plans are being realized (1:3-14).
- Jesus has the throne (1:15-23).
- Humanity is coming to life in him (2:1-10).
- The Messiah's peace is reuniting everything (2:11-22).

But, if Jesus is running the world, why do we suffer? Why was Paul locked up in Caesar's prison when he wrote this? Doesn't it feel incongruous?

Rather than complain that he's starved of food and sleep in these oppressive conditions, Paul flipped the script—the humour of incongruity.

Paul is the ambassador of another King, bringing good news of peace for all humans from the King of Kings. Caesar's mob don't yet recognize the divinely appointed king, so they lock up his ambassador to impede his message. Ultimately, the reason Paul is in prison is Jesus' kingship, with Caesar not worth mentioning:

Ephesians 3 ¹ For this reason I, Paul, **the prisoner of Christ Jesus** for the sake of you Gentiles ... (NIV)

Not only is that statement a hilarious snub to Caesar's impotence, it's also an astounding revelation of the gospel. Previously, he explained how you (gentiles) were dead, slaves of evil in kingdoms that received their power from the spirit of the rebellion against God kingship (2:1-2). Later he'll insist that the humans who work for Caesar are not our enemies, merely slaves of the powers of evil too (6:12).

Seriously, Caesar isn't the problem. Jewish people had been enslaved to power after power (Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, the Seleucids, and Rome) because there was a spiritual enemy behind these powers. You can't say that without realizing that the nations themselves were also slaves of this spiritual enemy too.

And that's why Paul's gospel is such good news! Ambassador Paul proclaims the release of the whole of humanity out of the reign of sin and death, into the peace and citizenship of King Jesus (2:11-22). The nations, along with the Jewish people, are being raised up out of their dead existence to form a single unified humanity in the reign of King Jesus (in Christ).

It is for this message that Paul is incarcerated. He is being held hostage for the good news that frees the gentiles of Asia Minor. He sees himself as a hostage in their place, locked up *for their sake*—so they can go free.

That's the sense Paul makes of his incongruous suffering.

After all, how did Jesus become king? Not by fighting Rome, since his kingship was not given to him by the authorities of this world (John 18:36). He suffered on behalf of his oppressed people to emancipate (ransom) the slaves, receiving the kingship by divine appointment when God raised him out of death to the throne. His suffering freed us.

And if that's the path Jesus took, that's the path we follow. When we suffer at the hands of evil, that suffering is not meaningless: it is redemptive. We suffer for the sake of the world, to bear away the iniquities that divide and oppress humanity.

Does that make it worthwhile, when you can suffer as a servant of King Jesus, for the sake of people who need to see the good news that Jesus, in his people, is bearing away the sins of the world?

Good mysteries have a reveal (Eph 3:2-6)

A surprise birthday party? A campaign shrouded in mystery until the launch? The joy of good secrets is in the reveal.

But we struggle when we don't know. We fill the vacuum with stories or fears of what might happen. Even theologians fear the worst when we don't know. Like what will happen to people who never heard about Jesus? Maybe we need to trust God instead of letting our imagination run amok.

One of the unknowns in Old Testament times was what God would do with the nations that had given Israel such a torrid time. There were some who hoped for the best, that the nations might ultimately recognize Israel's God (e.g. *The Letter of Aristeas*). But most imagined that God would have to judge and destroy the nations in order to restore Israel:

The overwhelming attestation of, references to, and portrayals of Gentiles in Jewish apocalyptic literature is that of their ultimate judgment and final destruction.¹¹

When God finally sent the Messiah, Jesus did not do what they expected. Instead of leading a war to free Israel and destroy the nations, he was crucified at the hands of the nations. That was not the outcome they wanted, so you can understand Saul of Tarsus angrily resisting Jesus' supporters.

Until ... until Paul encountered the resurrected Messiah. In that very first encounter, Jesus revealed that he never planned to obliterate the nations. Jesus intended to include the nations under his reign, so he commissioned Paul as his ambassador to the nations to tell them so:

Acts 9 ¹⁵ This man [Paul] is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles [nations] and their kings and to the people of Israel. (NIV)

What a revolutionary revelation! Jesus had not destroyed the nations, because they belonged under his kingship? With their kings? And the people of Israel?

Before this encounter, the question of what God would do with the nations was as much a mystery to Paul as it was to other Jews. Now he is the ambassador of Jesus' kingship to the nations, explaining that God was setting the world right by including them, along with Israel, under divine kingship.

Never in his wildest dreams had Paul imagined this answer to the mystery of God's intention for the nations. This revelation defines who Paul is. His purpose in life is to be Jesus' ambassador to the nations (apostle to the gentiles):

Ephesians 3 ² Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the **mystery** made known to me by **revelation**, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been **revealed** by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶ This **mystery** is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. (NIV)

This is not a mysterious text. It's crystal clear when you read:

- **mystery** = the unknown: the issue of what God would do with the nations when he saved Israel;
- **revelation** = the reveal: the astounding realization that God is including the nations, along with Israel, as a fully restored humanity in the Christ (God's anointed ruler).

Of course, this is what the whole letter has been about. Chapter 2 bubbled over with *the good news of peace*, God breaking down the division, so the excluded nations receive citizenship through the Messiah. And Chapter 1 began the big plan God predestined for creation (1:4), the reign of the Messiah through whom God "fills everything in every way" (1:22).

¹¹ Michael P. Theophilus, "The Portrayal of Gentiles in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature," in *Attitudes to Gentiles in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 91.

And a final twist. The word “revelation” in 3:3 is *apokalypsis*—the very word that gave its name to Apocalyptic literature, the writings that imagined God pouring out judgment on the nations and destroying them for what they did to Israel. But it turns that God had been far more generous than anyone had imagined. The God **revealed** in Messiah Jesus includes the nations under his reign instead of destroying them.

So perhaps we shouldn’t imagine the worst for things that are still a mystery to us, issues like the fate of the unevangelized. We might be better to trust the character of God instead of our fears.

Revealing the reign (Eph 3:10)

What does God intend the church to be and do? That question matters more than all the goals and KPIs we set for ourselves.

So how does this sound?

Ephesians 3 ¹⁰ His intent was that now, **through the church**, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. (NIV)

Say, what? Does the church exist so God can show off to rulers and spiritual beings?

With the wrong assumptions, this picture is a dark puzzle. But it makes brilliant sense when illuminated by the story about God’s kingship (the kingdom of God), revealed in his Messiah.

Here’s how some people try to make sense of this verse. They assume angels and demons were ignorant of God’s plans. It was a “mystery” to them, as it was to us. So, the spiritual powers only found out what God was up to when they heard it from the church (on the assumption that *through the church* means through preaching). What preaching are we referring to? Here the interpretation splits: it could mean announcing the good news (Ben Witherington), or denouncing the bad rulers (Walter Wink).

But the verse does not say the church makes the reveal; God does. Secondly, this interpretation focuses on merely one task of the church (preaching) rather than on the very existence of the church in God’s world. Thirdly, this interpretation doesn’t connect well with the story Paul is developing in Ephesians.

In Chapter 2, we saw how the nations transgressed their boundaries to crush God’s nation, so the whole of humanity was dead under sin instead of living under God. The unknown (mystery) was what God would do with the transgressing nations when he restored his people.

God’s solution was to send his anointed to bring peace to these warring groups, by including the nations under his kingship. The Messiah reunified humanity in his own being, becoming the place where the heavenly sovereign lives among his earthly subjects—the temple where everyone has access to God through Christ Jesus, the cornerstone of God’s entire restoration project (2:11-22).

That is the significance of the church. It is the new humanity—raised out of oppression under death, into peace in the Messiah. It is the reunified community of peace in King Jesus’ reign, the restored human community—no longer rebelling, but embodying God’s presence.

The church is this earthly community of diverse humans, unified in God's Anointed, living under his kingship. It is the present expression of the kingdom of God—incomplete, but already present. By establishing the church in the Messiah, God has sent a message to the powers that the attempted coup against God's reign on earth is over. The very existence of the church as reunified humanity in the Messiah says: the coup has failed!

That is the significance of the church. With all her diversity, the church represents the *multifaceted wisdom of God* because her existence reveals how the heavenly sovereign solved multiple problems at once. Not only did God rescue his nation from the transgressing nations; he brought the nations back into his reign also.

The existence of the church therefore sends a message to the human rulers and also to the spiritual powers that drive them to divide and devastate the earth. The focus isn't on the church's preaching, but on the message God has sent by establishing the church.

So what is God's intention for the church? To be the reunited human community, living life in allegiance to God's anointed ruler. It's primarily about being, rather than preaching. There's very little in the rest of Ephesians about preaching; the whole thing is about being what God intends the church to be.

So, church, let's not put too much emphasis on putting on a good show in Sundays. Let's encourage each other to wrestle with the things that divide us, so we can live as one corporate entity—the embodiment of King Jesus and his restorative reign for the benefit of all people on earth (Ephesians 4). Let's treat each other the way the Messiah treated us, literally as his life-partner: the bride participating in his life, the queen sharing in his reign (Ephesians 5). Let's not treat human rulers as enemies, but merely as slaves of spiritual powers—as we face them with nothing but the armour God wore at his crucifixion (Ephesians 6).

So here's the expanded logic of Ephesians 3:10, in its context:

God's multifaceted wisdom has now been shown to both the earthly rulers and to the spiritual authorities they were serving. The mystery of what God would do with the nations when he rescued his nation is finally resolved. Like the wise ruler he is, God solved multiple problems at once in the Messiah. He saved both his oppressed nation and the oppressing nations who were themselves oppressed by the powers of evil. He ended the hostilities, making peace in the Messiah, drawing everyone together into a universal citizenship under the governance of his anointed, forming us all into a temple where the heavenly sovereign is welcome to live among and govern humanity.

That, my friends, is the significance of the church: the community where God's reign is already present and revealed to the powers that claim authority in his earthly realm.

What others are saying:

Andrew T. Lincoln:

The writer does not spell out exactly how the Church makes known God's purpose to the powers. Conzelmann (104) claims that it is through the Church's preaching, and this same assumption misleads Wink (*Naming the Powers*, 89–96), who connects 3:10 with 3:8 and argues that the reference is

to the preaching to the angels of the Gentile nations, which has to accompany the proclamation of the good news to the Gentiles. But the text does not mention preaching, and Wink's discussion ignores the function of the earlier reference to Paul's preaching the good news to the Gentiles and its relation to the thought of 3:6 that Gentiles have become joint members of the body. ...

The writer's thought is, therefore, best understood as being that by her very existence as a new humanity, in which the major division of the first century world has been overcome, the Church reveals God's secret in action and heralds to the hostile heavenly powers the overcoming of cosmic divisions with their defeat (cf. also Minear, "The Vocation to Invisible Powers," 94–101). ... The mystery is disclosed in the Church and through her is being made known to these very powers that their malign régime, particularly over that part of humanity, the Gentile world, thought to be especially under their sway, has come to an end.¹²

Rudolf Schnackenburg:

In 3:10 this connection becomes clearer in the light of the divine economy of salvation: Through the Church, through her becoming manifest, through her outward form which includes the one-time Gentiles (v. 6) the Wisdom of God which planned their subjugation will be revealed to the powers and forces.¹³

Frank Thielman:

In light of the way Paul speaks of "the rulers and authorities" elsewhere in the letter, there can, in any case, be little doubt that Paul considered these figures to be thoroughly evil spiritual beings who exercised power over the unbelieving world (2:1–2; 6:12). The church is unified across ethnic lines and is a newly created human being. By its very existence as a unified body, then, the church makes known to the evil spiritual rulers and authorities the vastness of God's creative wisdom: he not only created the universe with its endless variety, but in a wholly surprising way he has also begun to restore the crowning achievement of his creation—humanity—to its original unity.¹⁴

Who are the rulers of Ephesians 3:10?

To whom did God reveal his multifaceted wisdom, according to Ephesians 3:10?

- a) to **rulers and authorities**, both of whom exist in the heavenlies, OR
- b) to **rulers** (kings/governors on earth), and to authorities in the heavenlies?

Either interpretation is possible, but there are grammatical and contextual reasons to consider the second option.

¹² Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1990), 186–187

¹³ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: A Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 140.

¹⁴ Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 216.

Grammatically, the article is repeated. Translated literally, the phrase is:

to the rulers and to the authorities in the heavenlies.

Most translations miss this detail, making us less likely to consider (b).

Contextually, this verse is discussing the reveal of a mystery. The mystery was the gnarly problem of what God would do to the nations when he finally sent his anointed ruler (the Christ) to rescue his people. They had been suffering for six centuries under foreign rulers, from Nebuchadnezzar to Caesar.

When the Davidic king (the Lord's anointed) finally came, they discovered God's answer to this mystery. The heavenly sovereign demonstrated his multifaceted wisdom by solving both problems at once: ending the war, uniting Jews and gentiles into a single global citizenship in the reign of his anointed (in Christ). The presence of this reunified humanity is therefore a message to both the human rulers who wage war in their attempt to subjugate people under their power, and also to the spiritual powers to whom those human rulers are enslaved.

That picture—oppressive human rulers who are slaves of evil spiritual powers—is precisely the framework of the apocalyptic literature. This interpretation best fits the apocalyptic framework of Ephesians 3 (the mystery and the reveal).

But we in our modern world have a different framework, one that makes us less likely to consider option (b). We think of God only in terms of spiritual power, not political power. We reduce Jesus to the role of personal Saviour (one who saves me from my personal sins), missing his Messianic role (enthroned as God's anointed ruler over the earth).

When God raised his anointed out of death and enthroned him as King of Kings, he sent a strong message to the rulers of the earth. The message was, "Earth is no longer subject to you who serve the dark powers; I have given all authority over the nations to my Anointed."

So how do Christians (followers of King Jesus) treat the rulers of this world?

- God's original plan was for humans to represent his devoted and blameless character in his earthly realm (Ephesians 1:4), so that's the regal kingship over the earth that God is restoring in the Messiah's people (1:20-22).
- When the nations ("you") crushed Israel ("we"), the whole earth came under the reign of evil and death (2:1-3), and so it is the nations and the Jews together who form the citizenship of God's kingdom in his anointed ruler (2:4-22).
- So that means we cannot treat the human oppressors as our enemies, since they themselves are merely slaves of evil powers (6:12). So our role is not to oppose the human rulers. There's is no point trying to expose them as agents of evil, since that's not how God did it.

When God donned his armour to release his people from the reign of evil, he didn't fight the human rulers. He came dressed in the truth of what Heaven had decreed for the earth, standing in the righteousness character of our heavenly sovereign, ready to spread the good news of making peace, trusting God's decrees regarding the earth. That's precisely how we must relate to this world's rulers too (6:13-17).

So, when God established the church as his diverse and multiethnic humanity reunified in God's anointed, God was making a statement both to the human rulers and also to the spiritual powers those rulers served—to the rulers, and to the authorities in the heavenlies.

When God gave the kingship to Messiah Jesus our ruler, he restored the earth from evil rule into the governance he had always intended. It was an effective message to the rulers of the earth and to the spiritual powers that oppressed them. It was what God had always planned for the earth: “his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord” (3:11).

Worth considering?

In honour and shame (Eph 3:13)

Is Chapter 3 interrupting the main message of Ephesians? Lynn Cohick calls it “a digression from his argument in 2:22 which he then picks up again in 3:14.”¹⁵ Markus Barth calls it “an excursus on the commission given to Paul by God.”¹⁶

As indicated by the dash at the end, verse 1 is an incomplete sentence:

Ephesians 3 ¹ For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—

² Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you. (NIV)

It sounds like Paul starts a thought, and breaks off. But there may be a better way to understand these verses than to treat them as a mere tangent where the writer got distracted from his gospel message.

Chapter 2 explained “the good news of peace.” God ended centuries of hostility between “we” (Jews) and “you” (gentiles). In the Messiah, he created a reunified humanity where the old divisions are gone, where Jews and non-Jews are “fellow citizens” under the Messiah’s governance. While Peter, James and others were announcing this good news in Jerusalem, Paul understood the significance of taking the good news to the nations as well.

So it is no digression for Paul to explain his role as ambassador of King Jesus announcing peace for the nations. It’s a perfectly natural progression for someone whose reason for living is to explain the reign of King Jesus to the nations who no longer need to remain under “the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (2:2).

But the kingship of Jesus blows away the usual honour / shame paradigm of the political world. Jesus became king not through the honour of killing his enemies, but through the shame of crucifixion. And even though King Jesus has appointed Paul as his ambassador bearing the good news of peace to the nations, the rulers of this world have Paul in prison. Paul sees his imprisonment as an opportunity to represent his king to this world’s rulers. People tend to notice when he spends his sentence singing praise to his king (Acts 16:25).

In fact, Paul thinks it’s a great irony that while Caesar has him locked up, the people of the nations are still escaping the oppressive powers that Caesar serves (compare 2:2). Paul is quite happy to be held hostage while the people of the nations are finding freedom in God’s restored government over everyone, established through the Messiah. That’s the point of Paul’s hostage claim in 3:1. He sees himself as in prison “for the sake of you Gentiles.”

¹⁵ Lynn H. Cohick, *Ephesians*. New Covenant Commentary Series. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010. 81.

¹⁶ Markus Barth. *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 1–3*. Vol. 34. Anchor Yale Bible. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008. 350.

This is a natural progression of the message, not a digression. So why does Paul break off mid-sentence in verse 1? I suggest it's a pastoral move: he realizes he may have shamed his hearers.

Paul himself may feel honoured to serve time in Caesar's jail as the imprisoned ambassador of King Jesus. But imprisonment is something normally considered shameful, and even more so in their honour / shame culture. Even worse, if Paul is serving time on their behalf ("for the sake of you Gentiles"), they are made to feel that he is carrying their shame.

From their perspective, Paul may not be the first Jew to have treated them as inferiors (shamed). The whole Jewish apocalyptic genre treated Jacob's descendants as the honoured people, and imagined God giving the nations what they deserved for their shameful treatment of God's people. That's why Paul flips the apocalyptic story, explaining that when the mystery finally was revealed, the Messiah honoured the gentiles by including them—extending the honour of being "heirs together with Israel, members of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (3:6).

Paul bends over backwards to remove any hint of anyone feeling superior. His commission as ambassador of King Jesus could be seen as a position of great honour, so he insists it was just a gift, a gift given to someone who is inherently "the least of all the Lord's people." It's not about his own honour but about the benevolence of King Jesus who included the gentiles as equals and therefore commissioned Paul "to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ" (3:8).

And that's why this reunified humanity that exists in the citizenship of King Jesus is so significant. Those who already give allegiance to King Jesus (the church) are the place where God has revealed his multi-faceted wisdom to the rulers who have Paul locked in jail, and also the spiritual powers that the rulers are enslaved to until they believe the good news (3:10-12).

In other words, this whole section is not a diversion but a pastorally sensitive encouragement, so the gentiles will not consider Paul's imprisonment on their behalf as their shame. He wants them to view his imprisonment as just what you would expect the rulers of this world to do to an ambassador of a higher king, a position of tremendous honour.

The cross has overturned the honour / shame paradigm, and it continues to do so for the people who serve the crucified and resurrected king. Paul already turned it upside down when he described himself as "the prisoner of King Jesus" (3:1). He wraps it up like this:

Ephesians 3 ¹³ I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory. (NIV)

God and the human family (Eph 3:14-19)

How do we respond to the news that God unites us as his family?

The gospel is the good news that God has restored peace to all the peoples of the earth through his anointed ruler (Ephesians 2). So what's our response to this good news?

What people often do with the gospel today doesn't match the response in Ephesians 3.

- Evangelicals try to convince individuals they're sinners and get them saved.

- Justice warriors name and shame the regimes for their sins (systemic oppression).

But Paul doesn't stand up to condemn individuals or regimes:

- He kneels to acknowledge the throne of the ancient ruler whose kingship is now restored in the reign of his anointed.
- He explains that, as a consequence of the Messiah's reunification of humanity, the whole human family now has a single Father. He honours the Patriarch who gave us our life, who now draws us together as family.
- While kneeling before the family's Father, he makes a request: that the sovereign's rich glory empower his family to experience the full extent of his love in the Messiah, so the Father's love fills the whole family.

There are other things we can do to enact our Sovereign's life as his family on earth. How to live as his family is the subject of the next three chapters (Ephesians 4–6). But our first and most definitive response to the gospel must be responding to the Father who is reunifying us, not condemning people for disobedience.

The *Father* connection was already present in Old Testament times, when the Davidic king represented the earthly reign of Israel's Father in heaven (2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7). By drawing God's nation and the gentile nations together in his kingship, the Messiah therefore formed us all into one family, under one Father: "For through him, we both have access to the Father by one Spirit" (2:18).

So the response to the good news is to bow in allegiance to this one Father, the Patriarch of the whole human family, the sovereign over heaven and earth. Bowing in his service, we make the request that all his people will know the extent of his redemptive love, the love that transforms the way we treat each other as family here in his earthly realm.

Join me in making this prayer our response to the gospel:

Ephesians 3:14-19 (interpretive translation)

¹⁴ In response to the reunification of humanity, I bow my knees to our Father, ¹⁵ the Patriarch whom the whole family in heaven and on earth names as sovereign. ¹⁶ My request is that, out of his regal wealth, he gives you (his people) a gift of empowerment to make you strong, through his Spirit in your inner person.

¹⁷ The Messiah is to take up residence among us, through the loyalty you give him in your hearts, where his love has taken root and been established. ¹⁸ This enables you, along with all those devoted to God, to come to grips with the width, length, height and depth of the Messiah's love, ¹⁹ to know the love that's beyond knowing, the love that fills the community with all the fullness of God.

More than we imagine (Eph 3:20-21)

Your dreams may not be big enough.

Ephesians 3:20 says God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. So how big can you dream?

Our dreams change at different stages of life. Children's dreams are like Disney movies. Teens imagine the person of our dreams responding to how we feel. We hope to find our dream job, our dream car. Our imagination can go wild over music or art, creating a business or trading in shares, adventures in exotic places. The sky is the limit: *God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.*

YouTube has no end of sermons and conference messages on Ephesians 3:20, saying exactly that. But there is a problem. Starting with the self and what I want, it's all too easy to reduce God to my servant, a fairy-godmother to call on to grant my wishes and fulfil my dreams.

That's not the story of Ephesians 3:20. It doesn't start with God bowing his knees to us, but us bowing our knees to him (3:14). God's role is not fairy-godmother, but Father—the wise Patriarch who calls the whole family into caring harmony (3:15). Rather than fulfilling my desires, God gives us power to do his bidding (3:16). His divine presence among us empowers us to love each other in the astounding way he has loved us in Christ (3:17-18). In him, I cannot be full of myself and my dreams; the goal is to be full of God and his dreams for us all (3:19).

When God stepped into history, he did immeasurably more than anyone asked or imagined. Before Christ, humanity was at war over competing dreams. One story claims that when Alexander the Great had subjugated the known world, he wept that there were no more worlds to conquer. Eventually the Greeks lost power to the Rome, the Empire that forced all Europe into submission with their powerful army. These tyrants, like others before them, conspired to crush God's nation too, claiming for themselves the land God had promised Abraham.

In their suffering, Jewish apocalyptic writers imagined travelling into the heavens to find out how God would resolve this injustice. They imagined God doing what he had done in the days of Noah, a mighty outpouring of his anger against the nations to restore his reign over his people.

But none of them imagined or even glimpsed the magnitude of what God would do when he sent his anointed ruler to his people. God saw how the nations were just as dead under the powers of evil as his own nation was. His anointed entered into the death of Israel **and** the death of the nations at the hands of the powers of evil. When he rose from the dead, the Messiah made us alive with himself (2:5), raised up with Christ in his reign (2:6). Despite what the nations had done, God rescued them anyway because of his astounding benevolence (2:8). God broke down the division between his nation and the nations (2:14), ending the hostilities (2:16), bringing the whole humanity together as citizens of God's reign (2:19), the place where God dwells (2:20).

In all the prayers of God's people before the Messiah came, in all their wildest imaginative stories, no one had ever dreamed God would do something global like this. What God did in Christ really was *immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.*

Ephesians 3:20 is not a licence for selfish dreams. It's about God's astounding dreams for planet earth. God's dreams for his earthly realm are *immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine.*

What do you imagine as the future of our world? While many people live in fear of losing power, of domination by evil, of wars and nuclear disasters, our trust is in the God who saves. We anticipate a day when every knee bows to God's anointed and every tongue

confesses allegiance to him. What God is doing for all the people of the earth in his anointed is *immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine*.

Dream bigger!

My prayer now is that we who give allegiance to King Jesus will lift up our eyes to our leader and express his loving governance as his community, living in confidence of where his kingship will take us all:

Ephesians 3 ²⁰ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (NIV)

Part 2:

The good news community (Ephesians 4 – 6)

Ephesians 4

Ethics from a convict (Eph 4:1)

“As a jailbird, I urge you to live up to your calling.” That has to be one of the funniest sentences in the Bible. Do you really want to learn ethics from a criminal?

It makes no sense if you don't understand the gospel of the kingdom, the nature of sin and salvation.

We've already seen Paul describing how the shame of his incarceration (3:1) turns into “glory” (3:13) through the lens of the crucified King. His imprisonment shows what's wrong with the world, how oppressive the current regimes are (in contrast with what God intends).

It's been like this for a so long. His Jewish ancestors suffered for centuries at the hands of nations that showed no respect for what God had decreed to Abraham. The prophets suffered at the hands of Israel's rulers. John the Baptist and Jesus suffered for proclaiming God's reign (the kingdom of God). Peter was imprisoned. James was beheaded. It comes to as no surprise to Paul that, as King Jesus' ambassador to the nations, he will suffer at their hands (Acts 9:15-16).

This is the shape of human sin—the rebellion against God's reign. That's the sense in which Jesus took on the sins of the world in his crucifixion. If you think it was your personal sins that nailed Jesus to the cross, you've spiritualized something that happened before you were born, and you've missed the magnitude of sin and salvation, the world-transforming activity of God in Christ.

The gospel in Ephesians is:

- God has done in Christ what he always planned to do, restoring our inheritance by putting his anointed on the throne (Ephesians 1).
- God rescued humanity from enslavement under evil, raising us to life in his Messiah, breaking down the power divisions, ending the politics of war, establishing a reunified humanity in Messiah's reign, so God dwells among us (Ephesians 2).

- When God revealed what he would do with nations when he freed his people from oppression, no one had even imagined he would include them all in the reign of his Messiah (Ephesians 3).

Jesus' reign is good news for all people on earth. But it's threatening for the current rulers. If you think you have power, the gospel announcement that God has released the world from tyranny and given it to King Jesus is your worst nightmare. The tyranny of sin drives leaders to discredit, incarcerate, and even kill anyone who threatens your power—even children (Exodus 1:22; Matthew 2:16).

But the existence of a community that gives allegiance to King Jesus is evidence to both the human rulers and the spiritual powers that God's appointment of his anointed ruler has taken effect (Ephesians 3:10). The rulers can hold Paul hostage, but they're powerless to stop people escaping their clutches, into the kingdom of the Son.

When the rulers lock up Jesus' ambassador, they're drawing attention to the very thing the fear—the power behind him. We don't need to point out how bad the rulers are; persecution itself has that effect.

Paul was called to faithfully represent Jesus in prison, “as a prisoner for the Lord.” We're all called to faithfully represent the one who called us, by embodying the communal life of our king:

Ephesians 4 ¹ As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. (NIV)

What others are saying

Gushee and Stassen:

Christian ethics must avoid reducing the moral life to a mere decisionism ... Christian ethics is about the entire “way of life” of the people of faith (Eph 2:10; cf. Dt 30:19–20). ... Decisions, practices, convictions, principles, goals, and virtues are all included in the effort to “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel” (Phil 1:27; cf. Rom 16:2; Eph 4:1; Col 1:10) as we obey, seek, and embody the kingdom of God. ...

Our central task is to be useful servants of the reign of God, and thus with all our heart we seek to discern and put into practice a total way of life in tune with God's kingdom.¹⁷

¹⁷ David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 81

Being good news (Eph 4:1-6)

At the hinge of the book, Ephesians calls us to outwork the gospel: *to live a life worthy of the calling you have received* (4:1).

Previously, it explained the good news: God is reuniting humanity in the reign of his anointed. Now it explains how the good news people embody his reign: in community (4:1-16), in ourselves (4:17 – 5:20), in home and business life (5:21 – 6:9), and in the wider community (6:10-23).

Did you notice what's missing? In a book about the gospel, he forgot to advise us on how to get the unsaved to make a decision, how to get our neighbours into church, how to get that aunt to pray the Sinner's Prayer before she dies.

Our paradigm for evangelism doesn't match the New Testament. Our approach is flawed because we set ourselves up as judges of who's in and who's out, of who's saved and who's lost.

God never called us to be judges. We are to *live a life worthy of the calling we have received* (4:1). We're called to be the restored community under King Jesus, his diverse, unified kingdom. Being that community is our message. Where will Aussies discover the good news? In the good news people.

The gospel reunifies humanity. It ends our hostilities and power-plays. It empowers us to do life together under the Father, in the Son, through the Spirit.

Ephesians 4 shows how the good news comes to life:

- **The gospel** says that King Jesus is our peace, he who ... destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility (2:14).
The gospel community embodies his peace-making governance: Be completely humble and gentle; be patient bearing with one another in love (4:2).
- **The gospel says**, His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity ... making peace ... to reconcile ... through the cross by which he put to death their hostility (2:15-16).
The gospel community functions as reunified humanity, so we make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (4:3).
- **The gospel** says that in the Messiah we are being joined together and rising to become a holy temple in the Lord ... built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (2:21-22).
The gospel community is his corporate restorative presence, for there is one body and one Spirit ... one hope ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over and through all and in all (4:4-6).

What's at the root of all the strife and conflict in the world? Grasping at God's authority for ourselves (Genesis 3), and people taking power over each other's lives (Genesis 4). That's the nature of sin.

What reunites humanity with each other, under God? The good news of our heavenly sovereign restoring us to his governance in his anointed. That's the gospel.

As we get a grip on the multi-dimensional love of Christ, we become the community *filled to the measure of all the fullness of God* (3:18-19). That's the embodiment of the gospel.

Meditate on what it would look like to **be** the good news in your family, neighbourhood, and workplace, in all the communities where you live:

Ephesians 4 ¹ ... life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (NIV)

Spiritual formation (Eph 4:1–6)

Excerpt: What kind of "spiritual formation" does God desire for us?

Here's a confession. I've always been drawn to those parts of the Bible that spell out how I should live as a Christian. Ephesians 4–6 is so practical. I grew up in a church that emphasized personal piety and spiritual formation.

But obsessing about my spiritual development can be counter-productive if it makes me more focused on myself. In the end, I feel more convicted of my failings, more aware of my inadequacies, more critical of myself for falling short of God's expectations. I end up critical of others too: "They're no better, but at least I'm trying."

It's not easy to escape the cycle of the self. I can't, until I engage with something beyond me. Jesus' goal wasn't self-fulfilment, self-realization, or personal spiritual formation. He was less focused on developing his life, more focused on giving it. His radical idea was living not for the self, but for the many (Mark 10:45).

The Christian life is not a call to be a better self. It's a call to participate in restored community. It's so counter-cultural, but it makes sense: personal development isn't the goal; it's the by-product of relationship. (Just ask anyone who got married.)

This self-development view of Christianity is so pervasive that it even gets smuggled into our Bible translations. The application in Ephesians starts like this:

Ephesians 4 ¹ As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. (NIV)

Note: *a life*. A responsive reader concludes, "Ok, I must live my life worthy of the calling I have received."

Unfortunately, that's a mistranslation. There is nothing about *a life*. Word-for-word, it reads:

- worthily (ἀξίως)
- walk around (a metaphor for living life) (περιπατῆσαι)
- of the call (τῆς κλήσεως)
- of which you [plural] were called (ἧς ἐκλήθητε).

Note the plural. To unpack it, it's saying, "Conduct yourselves (as a community) in a manner that reflects the majestic character of the God who called you into kingdom life under his anointed."

You still want to include the individual focus? Read on:

4 ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. (NIV)

Every phrase is focused on our communal life:

- *humble*: in relation to others
- *gentle*: how you treat others
- *patient*: tolerance of others
- bearing with one another in love: clear enough?

It's not about becoming a better self. It's about maintaining unity with others, because God in Christ has ended our hostilities and glued humanity back together again:

4 ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (NIV)

The goal is not becoming a better person; it's coming together as *one* body, in *one* Spirit, with *one* hope; humanity united in *one* Lord in *one* faith, through *one* baptism; united in one God who is the Father of us all and permeates us all:

4 ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (NIV)

Nothing here says, "I must be a better me." The focus is entirely, "We must live together as the human community reunited under King Jesus."

Is there anything about personal development in Ephesians 4–6? There is, but always with the relational focus. As I learn to live humbly with others, to confront gently, to engage patiently, to stick with each other through our foibles, I become a richer person anyway. Let's get it the right way around: personal spiritual formation is the inevitable by-product of communal spiritual formation.

God's idea of spiritual formation is to form us together into a unified humanity in the reign of his Son, a community that grows into the full measure of God's anointed:

4 ¹³ ... until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (NIV)

Freud made a living by giving wealthy people a chance to talk about their favourite subject, but Jesus puts fractured humanity back together.

Grace is a generous king (Eph 4:7–10)

Divine benevolence beyond imagination.

If you want to handle Scripture well, you'll be very interested in how the New Testament writers handled the Old. What they do can seem puzzling, but it's so informative.

Consider this example where Paul seems to misquote a Psalm:

Ephesians 4 ⁸This is why it says:
 “When he ascended on high,
 he took many captives
 and **gave** gifts to his people.” (NIV)

Psalm 68 ¹⁸
 When you ascended on high,
 you took many captives;
 you **received** gifts from people. (NIV)

Why did Paul change *received* to *gave*? Some options:

- a) Did he get it wrong (from memory)?
- b) Did others read it this way (e.g. Targum Psalms)?
- c) Did he change it for a reason?

The third option may seem uncomfortable, but I think it’s the best way to understand how Paul thought about Scripture. The Psalm had significant meaning for Israel in earlier times. But now that God’s plans had been revealed in Christ, we discover that God had done more than anyone imagined.

What Psalm 68 meant in Old Testament times

It’s a Davidic psalm. The Davidic king asks God to deal with their enemies:

Psalm 68 ¹May God arise,
 may his enemies be scattered;
 may his foes flee before him. (NIV)

The king declares that when God takes the throne, those who fought against them will be brought down. They will recognize God’s kingship by paying tribute to him:

68 ¹⁸ When you ascended on high,
 you took many captives;
 you **received** gifts from people,
 even from the rebellious—
 that you, LORD God, might dwell there. (NIV)

But this was not Israel’s experience. Assyria and Babylon invaded, took the land, and terminated the Davidic kingship. Instead of foreigners recognizing Israel’s God with gifts, God’s people were paying tribute money to foreign rulers. They yearned for the day when God would lift this burden and save his people:

68 ²⁰ Our God is a God who saves;
 from the Sovereign LORD comes escape from death.
²¹ Surely God will crush the heads of his enemies. (NIV)

Psalm 68 in Ephesians

Paul’s gospel says that, in the Messiah, God has come and taken his throne. He has saved his people, and dealt with their enemies. But the way he achieved this is so astounding that it forever changed the way authority works on earth.

Here's how people normally gain power. When a ruler defeats his enemies, he receives recognition from the people who are now under his power. That's what Psalm 68 expects.

But that's not how Jesus became king. He stood up to the rulers, and they put him down. He descended into death, where the captives of the whole of history were trapped. On the third day, a divine intervention gave him the kingship—raising him out of death, restoring the throne to God's anointed.

In crowning Jesus as King, God overturned the powers that had been running the world, the powers that condemned and crucified him. So when Jesus broke the power of death, he emancipated the captives who had been held by death, but were now under his kingship. He captured captivity, leading the captives out of their enslavement, into the freedom of his kingship.

He received the throne not through people's accolades but through divine proclamation (Romans 1:4). God's proclamation unites everyone—the Israelites and their enemies—into a new humanity under God's anointed ruler. Not only did he raise "us" (Jews) up out of death to share his throne (Ephesians 2:6); he extended his kingship to the nations as well. Their enemies are *no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of his household* (2:19).

You could expect the nations to bring gifts of allegiance in recognition of King Jesus as Psalm 68:18 says. But somehow that fails to recognize the absurd generosity of what he has done for them. Jesus didn't become king by taking power over them, but by giving himself for them. He didn't ascend by putting them down; he descended to bring them up out of death.

While the wording of Psalm 68:18 is okay as a promise of what God would do, now that we've seen what God has done in his anointed, the Psalm doesn't begin to describe God's benevolence. Instead of expecting gifts in submission to his kingship, the Messiah gave gifts to empower humanity to live as his people.

The gospel of King Jesus rests on grace—the astounding benevolence of the heavenly sovereign, giving the Son who raises us up out of death, the Son who empowers us to mature into a new kind of humanity, achieving *the whole measure of the fullness of Christ* (4:13).

Ephesians 4 (my translation)

⁷ Each one of us is the recipient of the divine benevolence meted out in the gift of God's anointed. ⁸ That's why it says: "Having ascended to the high position, he captured captivity, giving gifts for humanity."

⁹ What does "he ascended" mean if it isn't that he also descended into earth's the lower part? ¹⁰ The one who himself descended is the same one who ascended over all the heavens, so he could fill it all.

Conclusion

Paul changed the wording of the Psalm because the grace God gave far surpassed what anyone had anticipated. We can't treat every word in the Bible as if it was the final word. The Bible is a window into the progressive revelation of God's restorative work. God has this tendency to move beyond what the prophets revealed. It's never inconsistent with the previous revelation, but it regularly exceeds what anyone imagined.

What others are saying

Frank Thielman:

The balance of the evidence favors the view that Paul himself changed the text of the psalm so that it conformed better to his concerns in 4:7–16. This evidence can be summarized in two points.

First, the targum of Ps. 68:19 is the only unambiguous evidence of a Jewish exegetical tradition that actually replaces the verb “received” with the verb “gave” ...

Second, Paul wrote in Greek to Gentiles in Asia Minor (2:11; 3:1; 4:17), not in Aramaic to Jews, nor even in Greek to Jewish Christians. Yet the targums are in Aramaic, the vernacular of Judea, Syria, and Mesopotamia during the time of early Christianity (Kaufman 1992: 173). Paul could have certainly assumed some knowledge of the Greek rendering of the Scriptures among his readers, but he would not have assumed that they were familiar with an exegetical tradition preserved only in an Aramaic paraphrase of the Hebrew Scriptures.

...

Paul himself, then, changed the Greek rendering of the text to suit his argument at this point in the letter. This should not surprise us.¹⁸

Becoming human: life in Christ (Eph 4:1-16)

It's easy to spend thousands on books and courses to help you become a better human. We're preoccupied with how I can reach my potential and have the best life I can.

There's a fatal flaw in that approach. What if my boss is a tyrant, or my spouse is a control freak? I can learn to disassociate, to isolate myself for my own sanity, but human flourishing is something we can only do together. Who can show us how to develop a better life together?

Let me recommend a book. It's called Ephesians. It's the good news that God is working to restore not just me but all of us together to become all he intended.

Truth is, we feel like we're not truly alive in a world where evil dominates the nations. God changed all that when his anointed ruler joined us in our death, and was raised to life as the rescuer and ruler of the people who are raised to life *in him*. Staggeringly, God extended his benevolence beyond the Jewish border, restoring life to the nations in King Jesus.

Did you get that? God is raising the whole of humanity out of our dead existence into life in the resurrected king! The old divisions and power fights no longer have meaning. Before Jesus, Israel was called to represent God's human restoration project to the nations, but she had lost her national identity. Jewish people speculated about what God would do to the nations when he restored his people, and most of it wasn't nice.

But when God finally resolved this mystery, he did far more than anyone had asked or imagined. God extended the kingship of David's son to include the nations. The Messiah

¹⁸ Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 267.

ended human hostilities and restored peace to the planet by extending his kingship to the nations—“no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people, members of his household” (2:19). No one had prayed for or even imagined this solution to the human problem.

The good news is that this is what God has done (Ephesians 1 – 3). The final three chapters spell out how we respond, what it looks like to live together as the global community of King Jesus.

How this works in practice

Jesus’ kingship spells the end of our political differences. We’re equal in him, so there’s no place for Neo-Nazi attitudes (as if Jews were inferior) or Zionist attitudes (as if Jews were superior). All humans have equal citizenship in the peaceful reign of the Jewish Messiah. He calls us to live together as humanity reunified in him: *one* body, in *one* Spirit, with *one* hope, *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, because God’s life permeates us all (4:1-6).

Jesus’ kingship is not subjugation; it’s empowerment. In the politics of this world, people are required to pay tribute taxes to their leader. It’s what David did when he defeated their enemies (2 Samuel 8:2-6), and it’s what their enemies did to them (2 Kings 23:33), so it’s the language of Messianic victory over the nations in Psalm 68:18. But when Jesus received power, he did so much more than anyone imagined: instead of taking tribute, he *gave* gifts to his people—gifts of empowerment, appointments to share with him in enacting his royal reign (4:7-11).

The servants of King Jesus are commissioned to empower the rest of humanity to experience his restorative kingship (“the knowledge of the Son of God”). Humanity was designed to image our heavenly king (Genesis 1:26-28), and for the first time we’ve seen that fully realized—in Jesus. Participating in him (in his leadership) transforms us (“matures us”) into the full expression of what it means to be human (“the whole measure of the fullness of Christ”) (4:12-13).

As King Jesus leads us towards this goal, his transformation of humanity is staggering:

- We start out as naïve toddlers who don’t understand what’s wrong with the world, tossed from pillar to post by the crashing waves of power that break over us. We’re pommelled with cunningly devised propaganda from political persuaders who promise us a better future if we will trust them to lead us (4:14).
- Jesus exposed those lies by declaring the truth of God’s kingship over the world, even when it was not to his advantage (John 18:37). In giving his life, he established a community founded on the truth of God’s kingship expressed in sacrificial love. Heaven confirmed this truth by raising him from the dead. Our resurrected king now calls us to be the authentic expression of the community he loves, the implementation of his government on earth. As we live out this message sacrificially, it has the ring of truth that other political messages lack: “truth spoken in love” (4:15).

Imagine a global community where each part exists to support the other, a healing community where each part is healed with authentic love, a corporate organism that’s growing into the house of the living God, the expression of his sovereign love in practice (4:16).

What a vision God has for the world! How do we participate? Stay tuned. The rest of Ephesians is the game plan.

What others are saying

Michael Gorman:

To be in Christ as an alternative community is to be *a living exegesis, or faithful interpretation, of the gospel*. It is to become like Christ and therefore, in a profound sense, to become the gospel by becoming communal commentary on it. That, brothers and sisters, is true fellowship—participation in God's work. ...

You see, the crucified Jesus was a *Christophany*—revealing what the Messiah is like. But it is also a *theophany*—revealing what God is like. And it is also an *ecclesiophany*—revealing what the church is supposed to be like. And ultimately it is also an *anthrophany*—revealing what human beings are meant to be like.¹⁹

Bryan Stone:

The most evangelistic thing the church can do today is to be the church—to be formed imaginatively by the Holy Spirit through core practices such as worship, forgiveness, hospitality, and economic sharing into a distinctive people in the world, a new social option, the body of Christ.²⁰

Empowering the king's servants (Eph 4:10-13)

The gospel of the Lord is the good news of his kingdom—his kingship restored to the earth in his anointed. Here it is in summary:

Ephesians 4 ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe. (NIV)

The Bible's whole story in that verse. Our heavenly sovereign entrusted his earthly realm to people who rebelled against his kingship and ended up as captives to evil instead. Instead of using force to defeat force, God's anointed ruler joined us in our captivity, dying at the hands of the rulers who were puppets of evil. When God raised him out of death, the captives enslaved under death were set free—free to live in the reign of God's anointed. When the king was restored to us, his kingdom was restored to the universe.

Since God designed humans to be agents of the divine sovereign's reign in his earthly realm (Genesis 1), the Messiah restored this mandate to humanity when he re-established God's reign. The resurrected king gave gifts to humanity. His gifts were people—people entrusted

¹⁹ Michael Gorman, "A letter from Paul to Christians in the US" (*Christianity Today*, 2019) <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/letter-paul-christians-us>

²⁰ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness*. Electronic edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007).

with the responsibility to share in his management of the planet, by leading humanity into communal life under his kingship:

Ephesians 4 ¹¹ So Christ himself **gave** the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (NIV)

This is unique. Any other ruler would have been wary of trusting power to ex-rebels, but Jesus entrusts his regal dominion to people, servants who empower the whole of humanity to grow up into Christ, our king.

These “five-fold ministry gifts” are a favourite in church ministry training. Most courses teach that these “offices” exist to equip the church to do its ministry. There’s a danger here. We can end up turning people into **our** servants—free labour for whatever we need done to keep the church running.

When Paul spoke of *equipping his people for works of service*, he didn’t mean parking cars, ushering, and playing guitar. Those things may be desirable for a good church experience, but they are not the *works of service* Paul had in mind. Jesus’ kingship is not about getting people to serve us in the church. It’s about empowering the church to be the community that’s doing what King Jesus wants in his world.

The **body of Christ** is his corporate presence. For thirty-something years, Jesus had a body that limited him to one place at a time. What he did in that body was to reconcile humanity to himself through the cross (2:16). Because he entered our death, we were “in him” when he rose out of death. He is present in the new humanity that rose up in him—**one body, co-participants of the promise fulfilled in King Jesus through the good news [of his enthronement]** (3:6). The reunification of humanity in him forms us into **one body, one Spirit, called to one hope** (4:4).

That hope is explained in 4:13 as humanity restored to what God always intended, unified and functioning as the global community under divine governance (as the kingdom of God). We had lost track of what it meant to be human until we saw it in Christ. Now, under his leadership, humanity can finally mature into what God intended, bringing to fullness his life in his community, filling his world.

When Jesus gave gifts to this earthly realm, it wasn’t so we could get people to serve us. That’s the power-problem that has permeated all forms of society in God’s world, including the church. No, the gifts Jesus gave are *to equip his people for works of service*. As church leaders, we’re called to equip people to implement what King Jesus wants done in his world, to see the need, and address it with acts of service on behalf of the king.

This is a radical form of government. It isn’t intuitive. We’re used to a system with high taxes to pay for the bureaucracy employed to sort out all the communal issues: education, health, welfare, security, and do on. The kingdom of God doesn’t work like that. Jesus runs a grass-roots kingdom, where all his citizens are empowered to implement his reign.

And when humanity grows up into Christ, that’s what the world will be like. Can you imagine what human society will be like when we’re all imaging God to each other and to his world—*attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ?*

So the question for the church is this: How do we equip people to do these works of service for our king?

The kingdom goal (Eph 4:14-16)

The church has an important role in restoring the earth as God's kingdom, but the church isn't the goal. The church points to something bigger than itself: life under Jesus' kingship.

The king's goal is the whole of humanity healed from divisions, restored from the power fights that decimated us and drove us apart. The good news of King Jesus frees us from the political conniving, the propaganda, the lies that have driven us to war against each other and demean each other for gain.

King Jesus is creating a society where people speak truthfully to each other, without mixed motives or hidden agendas. Not truth used to hurt, but authenticity flowing out of genuine care for the well-being of the other—truth from a heart of love. His goal is a society where people value each other the way he valued us: he didn't condemn us; he gave his life for us.

His goal is a global community brought to maturity in the character of our king:

Ephesians 4 ¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (NIV)

How can the church model this kingdom hope?

- Unity of life (4:1-6). Sacrificial love (4:7-10). Equipping and empowering each other for “works of service” for the king in his world (4:11-13).
- Developing the character of the king in our lives, internally and relationally (4:17 – 5:20).
- Modelling what it looks like to live for the benefit of the other (submission instead of power-seeking) in home and business life (5:21 – 6:9).
- Engaging with the wider spheres of power where we can get hurt, wearing only the armour God wore when he came to deal with the powers (6:10-23).

The church has a role, but the goal is much bigger.

Kingdom culture (Eph 4:17–24)

Radical inclusivity is the good news of Ephesians. The Jewish writer rejects the use of labels like “uncircumcised” to marginalize people of other nations (2:11). Gentiles are no longer excluded from the covenant people: “no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens” (2:19).

Equality flows out of the gospel: “through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel” (3:6). King Jesus commissioned the writer “to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ” (3:8).

So, this comes as quite a shock:

Ephesians 4 ¹⁷ So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. (NIV)

What’s the problem? Many gentile practices were repulsive to Jews. Which ones does our author have in mind?

- Diet? Gentiles absorbed unclean food (like pork) into their bodies, making them unclean.
- Idolatry? Gentiles served many gods, becoming puppets of other powers (2:2).
- Sexual practices? Gentiles pursued their lusts in shameful ways (2:3), instead of living faithfully with their partners.
- Greed? Gentiles were dishonest, taking rather than contributing, refusing to stop for the Sabbath.
- Violence? Gentiles had warred against God’s people, hostilities the Messiah came to resolve (2:14-17).

Are some of those just cultural stereotypes? What does the writer mean by insisting that people of other nations must change their lifestyle?

Let’s be clear. The writer is not saying that gentiles must behave like Jews. He views his own people as just self-absorbed and disobedient as the nations (2:3).

Here’s the issue. Radical inclusivity demands change. We can’t go on treating each other badly, and then congratulate ourselves on how inclusive we’re being. The gospel is the good news of Jesus restorative kingship, so responding to the gospel is a change of allegiance. My allegiance can no longer be to myself and my mob; it is to Jesus, as Lord of all people.

I cannot smuggle my existing culture into the life of Jesus’ kingdom. The Jewish Messiah extended citizenship to the nations, and requires us to live as citizens of his kingdom. On the Jewish side, Galatians explains that God’s people are no longer defined by the boundary markers that separated Jews from gentiles (kosher food laws, Sabbath observance, circumcision, and ethnicity). On the gentile side, Ephesians insists that this is a complete change of culture.

When someone follows Jesus, you can see the radical reversal. We’re accustomed to living for the self, pursuing what we want (our lusts), as if consuming could satisfy us. That’s not how God’s anointed lived: he lived not for self-gratification, but to benefit us. He gave his life for the restoration of humanity. That’s the culture of his kingdom: a people who give their lives for each other, so humanity is growing towards the mature way of life revealed in him, “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of the Messiah” (4:13).

That radical reversal of life direction is the contrast in these two paragraphs:

Ephesians 4:17-24 (paraphrased)

¹⁷ In light of what we’ve been saying (the restoration of humanity that God is achieving in his anointed), I insist that you can no longer live as if it were business-as-usual for the nations. ¹⁸ They’d gone to the dark side in their

thoughts, alienated from God's life through the ignorance within them, through the callousness of their heart.¹⁹ Having desensitized themselves, they gave themselves up to sensuality, expressed in unclean actions, constantly consuming.

²⁰ That's not the Christ you learned, ²¹ assuming you heard him and were taught the truth in Jesus. ²² His truth sets you apart as a different culture to the old humanity that was corrupted by desires and deception, ²³ to be renewed in the spirit of your mind, ²⁴ to dress in the new humanity from God, created in his true righteousness, holiness, and truth.

Self-orientation demeans others, and so dehumanizes us. It's the culture of consumption, fighting each other to get more. That's the history of the world. It's the dark lie that's destroying us.

We realize that when we see Jesus. No self-seeking in him. He didn't live to fulfil his own desires; he lived for our sakes. In the culture of our King, we learn to be human. We discard our self-oriented culture like worn out rags, garments that no longer fit us. We put on a new culture, reflecting God's character, giving each other justice, pure devotion, the authentic life revealed in Jesus.

The reason we can't keep living like the nations is that we're under a new king, and he's creating a new culture for humanity. His radical inclusivity transforms us. In the name of the king, Scripture insists we exchange our previous posturing and positioning for his kingdom culture.

Fitted for a crown (Eph 4:22–24)

The present struggle is part of God's restorative work.

Recently I had a tooth break. My dentist gave me an appointment to be fitted for a crown. That's fine, but before she can fit the crown, she has to remove the decay.

That's how the Old Testament prophets described things too. They regularly spoke of God drilling down to remove the decay from his people, so he could restore them. They called it judgment, and it's the necessary preparation for God's restorative work.

God gave us humans such a regal identity: living images of the heavenly sovereign, entrusted with dominion over creation. We were "crowned with glory and honour" (Psalm 8:5).

But rebellion against God prevented us from measuring up to this glorious commission (Romans 3:23). Naturally enough, disconnecting from God caused our humanity to decay. We quite literally decay back into the ground from which we were formed (Genesis 3:19).

God so loved his decaying earthly realm that he gave us the gift of his own son—not to condemn the decaying world, but to save us from that decay (John 3:16-17). So even when humanity attacked and killed his Son, our Sovereign did not leave him decaying in the ground.

Here's how Peter announced the resurrection:

Acts 2:26–27 (quoting Psalm 16:9-10)

²⁶ Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest

in hope, ²⁷ because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see **decay**. (NIV)

God's resurrected Son overcomes the decay. He has been raised up, receiving back the kingship humans were intended to have over creation (Ephesians 1:19-21). We who were dead in our trespasses and sins are also brought to life in him, raised up with Christ, participating in his heavenly reign (Ephesians 2:5-6). In him, our humanity is restored (Ephesians 2:15), so we share in his glorious reign (Ephesians 3:10-20).

Sanctification is the restoration of our humanity. The Holy Spirit drills away our decay, restoring the magnificent character of our sovereign in his agents:

Ephesians 4:22–24

²² You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (NIV)

The drill that removes our decay is unpleasant. But it's worth it: we're being fitted for a crown.

The truth about lying (Eph 4:25)

Lies gain a competitive edge, but truth unifies us.

Lying gives me a competitive advantage. With a lie, I manipulate people for the outcomes I want. "I didn't do it" avoids punishment. "It's a wonderful old car" rewards the seller. You show an idealized image on social media, where romantic relations begin.

But lies are murder for relationships. The first lie was a brother saying, "Let's go out into the field" (Genesis 4:8). It wasn't an outright lie; more a deception to destroy the competition. Cain felt unaccepted. He believed his lie: he'd be more acceptable if his brother wasn't in the way.

Words open worlds.

Lies fabricate a world where no one lives. To enter a lie is to choose a wasteland of isolation, to become "a restless wanderer on the earth" (Genesis 4:12).

Truth opens the door to authentic worlds, worlds we can share. But truth feels vulnerable. Truth risks rejection.

In the wasteland, far from political power, the crowds came to crown Jesus as king (John 6:15). Realizing their fabrication of his identity was a lie, Jesus risked rejection by telling them the truth of who he was (6:24-58). When they saw the truth, they didn't like him anymore, abandoning him in droves. His pain is palpable as he asks the twelve, "You don't want to walk away too, do you?" (6:67).

Why risk rejection? Why not let people keep their comforting lies?

Words open worlds. Leaving people with their lies leaves them exiled in the wasteland. Truth demolishes fabricated worlds. Truth is the only redemption.

Authenticity connects my spirit with yours, my life with yours. Jesus knew: “The words I have spoken to you, they are my spirit, my life” (6:63).

This is not how popular politics works. In the TV Series *Deep State*, Max Easton is a spy who lies to his wife about his “business” trips. He doesn’t trust his handlers at MI6: they tell him whatever “truth” will motivate him to carry out their missions. Spies live lies. That’s what lends credibility to the fiction.

Truth is a keyword in Ephesians. *The truth* is that the kingship belongs to God’s appointed ruler, not the existing rulers and the deceivers they serve:

- *The message of truth* is the good news of God’s governance, the rescue of the nations into the reign of his anointed (1:13).
- There’s no stealth in Christ’s kingship. The rulers who serve the deceptive powers discover God’s multi-faceted wisdom in the community that embodies the governance of his anointed (3:10-11).
- Cunning and craftiness—deceitful scheming of this world’s powers—have no place in the Messiah’s people. *We speak the truth [of Jesus’ kingship] in love*; it’s the truth recreates the world (4:14-15).
- The truth that is in Jesus creates the truth of divine justice and pure devotion in his realm. That’s why it’s so crucial to put off the lie and speak truth (4:20-25).
- Competing powers are deception, empty words, darkness keeping people from the *goodness justice and truth* inherited in *the kingdom of Christ and of God* (5:5-8).
- There’s a *truth* that holds everything together like a belt when we find ourselves in conflict with the rulers of this world and the powers behind them. That truth is Jesus’ kingship: all authority rests with God’s anointed (6:12-14).

The world’s “truth” is the rule of the powerful: Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander the Great, Caesar, and so on. Might makes right. The fittest survive. The country with the biggest gun controls the world.

Scripture dispels those lies. Truth is, God rules. His decree gives the kingship to his anointed. His word recreates his world. This truth brings justice and equity to the people of earth who all belong in him.

Jesus was born to testify to the truth, namely God’s kingship in him (John 18:37). For this truth, we were born.

So, lose the lie and speak truth, each of you with your neighbour. We belong together, as part of each other. (Ephesians 4:25).

Processing offence (Eph 4:26)

Is there a conversation you need to have?

Growing up, I was never angry. Anger was sinful, so I could never be angry.

One day I discovered this in Ephesians 4:26: *In your anger, do not sin*. God knew I would feel angry, and he asked me to manage my response.

I can't tell you how liberating that was. For the first time, I could ask myself the question God asked Cain, "Why are you angry?" (Genesis 4:6). Owning the emotion was the first step to processing it. My anger often came from frustration, sometimes from injustice, occasionally I'd transferred it from another issue. Identifying and owning these emotions (affect labelling) was a stepping-stone to a healthy response.

I should have known that feeling anger wasn't sinful. God feels anger when he sees his children hurting each other. Sometimes I wish God would intervene, prevent the injustice, give the perpetrators what they deserve. But God doesn't react to evil with evil. When he's angry, he doesn't sin. Some of us may think the LORD is *too compassionate*, *too gracious*, *too slow to anger* (Exodus 34:6).

God calls his people to be like him. Psalm 4:4 advises, *Tremble, and do not sin*. The Greek translation (Septuagint) interpreted "tremble" as *be angry*, though it could be any emotion that disturbs our equilibrium (anger, fear, excitement, ...). The Psalm advises us to take time out (*when you are on your beds*) to process the emotion (*search your hearts and be silent*) in order to avoid an ungodly response.

Appreciate the ancient wisdom.

Then note the new level of urgency in the New Testament. The Psalm advised people to sleep on it (*on your beds*), but Ephesians advises we deal with our anger before we go to bed: *Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry*.

Picture a farmer in the New Testament world. He's angry with a neighbour, stewing as he walks the furrows. Perhaps he'll visit his neighbour to sort it out after work. But by the time the sun goes down, he feels exhausted and heads home to his wife and children, the evening meal and the bedtime stories. He falls asleep. Next morning as he heads back to the field, the issue with and the neighbour is still playing on his mind.

Ephesians insists that rebuilding relationship is the number one item on our To Do list. Don't leave it till tomorrow. Don't leave it till tonight. Stop work. Do it now.

Why? Because reconciliation isn't optional. It's the heart of the gospel. It's God's priority. What God achieved in Christ was the reconciliation of the nations into his kingdom. That makes us one new humanity in his anointed:

Ephesians 2 ¹⁵ His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. (NIV)

Our priority is therefore to embody the reconciled life, the gospel peace that makes us one in him:

Ephesians 4 ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (NIV)

That's why reconciliation is your number one priority today. The admonition to sort it out before sunset flows out of the preceding statement: *We are all members of one body* (4:25).

There's a posture for reconciliation: "I was angry when ... and I want to talk about it because we belong together."

That person is not your enemy. Open the door for your estranged friend. Otherwise you open the door for our real enemy (4:27). More on that next time.

No place for the devil (Eph 4:27)

Do not give the devil a place (Ephesians 4:27).

Three questions, but first a clarification. One translation says not to give the devil a "foothold." That's a very odd image, as if the devil is climbing up a rock face. The word is *topos*, a generic word for place.

So:

1. Who is the devil?
2. What kind of place does the devil want?
3. How do we avoid giving the devil a place?

Who is the devil?

If the devil is constantly tempting me to indulge in things I shouldn't, he must be very busy. The average lifespan is 2.3 billion seconds (73 years), and there are 7.8 billion people in the world. That gives the devil about one third of a second to spend on me in my lifetime.

Yes, the devil has reinforcements, but you get the point. The problem with so much of our thinking is that it's all about *me*. Our opponent is not a random personal tempter, but a military strategist with a targeted agenda.

The word devil (*diabolos*) means a slanderer, an enemy acting with malicious intent. The Septuagint (LXX) used *diabolos* to translate the Hebrew word *śā·ṭān* (adversary, enemy). Any opponent could be called a *śā·ṭān* (1 Samuel 29:4; 2 Samuel 19:22; 1 Kings 5:4; 11:14, 23, 25).

Israel faced many enemies. Assyria took most of the land. Babylon took the rest. Under Persian rule, Esther says, "I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated" (Esther 7:4). She names the *diabolos* plotting their destruction: it's Haman (Esther 7:6; 8:1 LXX).

With this procession of enemies, the Jews begin to realize that their enemy was something more persistent than the empire of the day. There was a *śā·ṭān*, a power behind the powers, a force driving the national forces to overpower and enslave them.

Why? God's plan was to restore the blessing of his reign to the nations through Israel. If God was using people, that's where his plan was vulnerable. By destroying Israel, the *śā·ṭān* could keep all the nations of the world (including God's beloved Israel) under its control.

But the *śā·ṭān* does not control the fate of the world. God is sovereign, and God's justice rules. So, the best strategy this Enemy had was to argue that Israel deserved to lose their place, to accuse Israel of being unfit for purpose, to prosecute the case that God's justice demanded their demise.

That's why the *sā·tān* is called the *diabolos*—the slanderer, accusing God's people of being incapable of representing God. At the time of the exile, Israel's disobedience had seen them lose their nation and come under foreign control. With the temple destroyed, they were unable to maintain their relationship with God. In Zechariah's vision, the high priest was unable to fulfil his role of mediating for God's people. Instead of the fine linen robes appointed by God, he wore the filthy garb of an exile, "with Satan standing at his right side to accuse him." The accuser aimed to keep Israel oppressed (Zechariah 3:1).

So here's the deal. The nations had gone their own way. God promised to restore his reign to the nations through Abraham's descendants. The enemy of God's people manipulated the kings of the nations to attack, enslave and destroy Israel. The accuser argued that Israel was unfit to be God's saving agent for the nations.

But the *sā·tān* failed. God's anointed ruler (Christ) released Israel *and* the nations into his kingship. That's the good news.

Here's how Ephesians 1–3 expresses this gospel:

1. God achieved what he always planned to do (1:3-14). In his incomparably great power, God gave the throne to his anointed, raising Christ out of death to *far above all rule and authority, power and dominion* (1:15-23).
2. The nations had been enslaved by *the ruler of the kingdom of the air*, and they'd enslaved God's nation too. God broke this death-power with resurrection (not war), extending his benevolence to everybody (2:1-10). The enmity of the enemy failed. This gospel of peace established a new humanity under God in Christ (2:11-22).
3. God's reign has arrived on earth in the assembly that gathers around God's anointed. Their very existence shows God's kingship to *the [earthly] rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms* (3:1-12). This magnificent solution means *every family in heaven and on earth* belong to *the Lord's holy people* in the life-giving power and immeasurable love of God's anointed ruler (3:13-21).

(This is, of course, the same "gospel of the kingdom" that was the heart of Jesus' theology.)

What kind of place does the devil want?

What of the *sā·tān* now? He's using recognizably the same old tricks against God's people (2 Corinthians 2:11).

The problem with God's plan is not that God isn't powerful enough. It's how God uses his sovereign power: he doesn't force us into his dominion (the way evil rulers do). God's anointed has all power in heaven and on earth. He calls us to announce this good news, so people can reorient to his kingship (repent) and trust him to lead humanity (faith).

But how can they believe if they don't hear? The vulnerability in God's plan is that God has entrusted the good news to us.

So, just as with Israel in Old Testament times, Satan's goal is to restrict the message-bearers so the message doesn't get through. Satan wants a place among the people of God, so he can destroy the credibility of the good news that reunites humanity under the kingship of God's anointed. Satan's strategy is to divide the family, to keep brothers and sisters at war with each other, to demonstrate that the gospel does not unite people in the reign of God's anointed.

The devil doesn't want a foothold: he wants a wedge—a space to drive apart the members of God's family, to prevent us reconciling in Christ. His strategy is to prevent people seeing the good news that King Jesus reconciles humanity in himself, by accusing God's people of being unable to reconcile with each other.

How do we avoid giving the devil a place?

We're going to get angry with each other. That's a given. How do we process our anger without sinning? There are two dangers.

One is to paper over the cracks, to pretend everything is fine when it's not. Pretence cannot bring us together. Confrontation can. We must speak truth to each other. Truth can unite us.

Or truth can divide. The devil is the master accuser, using truth to disempower, manipulate, and destroy. To process my anger in this accusatory way is to put the accuser's boot on your neck.

As I write this, I don't want to be the voice of the accuser, crushing you if you're struggling. I want to be the voice that calls us to solidarity with each other in Christ.

Ephesians 4 ²⁵ So, lose the lie and speak truth, each of you with your neighbour. We belong together, as part of each other. ²⁶ Be angry but don't sin. Let your anger sink with the sunset, ²⁷ so you don't provide the devil a place.

Offer your hospitality to the human, not the enemy.

In the words of John Chrysostom:

To be at war with one another, is "to give place to the devil."²¹

Thieves vs philanthropists (Eph 4:28)

Game's on. Who'll win?

Ever been robbed? You come home to a broken window and the realization that someone has been in your space. They've taken your stuff—some of it irreplaceable, like that ring that belonged to your Mum.

The thief doesn't care about you, or your Mum, or how your children will sleep after the intrusion. For the thief, you're not human; you're just your stuff.

The thief's attitude is pervasive. Ever had a business treat you not as a person but as a revenue stream? Like *Mr Robot*, it could turn you cynical: "Give a man a gun and he can rob a bank. Give a man a bank and he can rob the world."

²¹ John Chrysostom, "Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians," in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. William John Copeland and Gross Alexander, vol. 13, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889). 118.

Or, it could turn you to seek something better—an alternative world where people are valued. What's your preference: a world where we take from each other to build wealth, or a world where we contribute to each other to build community?

Jesus chose philanthropy. No, not money. He gave what was truly valuable. The king gave his life for his people. That's humanitarian.

The community under King Jesus experiences this reversal: from taker to giver, from controller to supporter, from thief to humanitarian, from self-focused to other-focused. This reversal characterizes a Jesus-follower. It's how people know who's with him (John 13:35).

This is the culture of his kingdom:

Ephesians 4 ²⁸ The thief must stop stealing and put his hands to work for good, so he can contribute to the person in need.

There's no honour among thieves; a heart shrinks to the size of the self. There is honour in the King's community; hearts grow to encompass each other.

Today, our work hours are reduced, as robots do the hard labour. Volunteering your time is a powerful way to build community. Like Peter said, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you" (Acts 3:6). Imagine responding to thieves like that: discovering what they really needed, and what evil was driving them.

Let's live as the humanitarian community of the King. Even if we get robbed on the journey.

What others are saying

F. F. Bruce:

The grace of generosity is part and parcel of the Christian way of life (Luke 6:29–36; 2 Cor. 8:1–15; 9:6–12), but when it is practiced by a former thief it stands in total contrast to his previous course of life.²²

B. F. Westcott:

Stealing is the typical form of using the labour of another to supply our wishes, while it is our duty to make our own labour minister to the needs of others. The inspiration of labour is not personal gain but fulness of service.²³

The scent of your words (Eph 4:29 – 5:2)

What we say reveals who we're speaking for.

Want peace on earth? There's a message that can deliver it. No, it's not "Everybody try harder!" It's the announcement that the hostilities are over because God has rescued humanity from the warring factions of evil, into the reign of his anointed. That's the good news of salvation.

²² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 362.

²³ B. F. Westcott, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, (London: Macmillan, 1909), 73.

Words matter.

Eleven words from God established his earthly realm from chaos (Genesis 1). Ten words from God established his nation from slavery (Exodus 20:1-17). The Word from God established his family from the alienated world (John 1:9-13).

Years ago, I served as a student pastor in Camp Hill. Last week's [news](#) disturbed me: a man from there poured petrol on his ex-wife and children. The fire didn't start with petrol; it started with inflammatory words.

Domestic violence cannot be resolved without addressing the cause: lust for power. A perpetrator who cannot control you threatens to destroy you. At every level, that's how evil works: bullying children, domestic violence, corporate manipulation, political power, world wars. Sin is grasping at power that should be in God's hands, to control each other.

Words matter.

Speaking the lie that we control people enslaves them. Speaking the truth that God is in control emancipates them.

Ephesians 4:29 – 5:2 (original translation)

²⁹ Don't let any demeaning speech come out of your mouth; only what's constructive and helpful. ³⁰ Don't give grief to God's Holy Spirit, the one who seals you in God's redemptive reign.

³¹ All resentment and fury and anger and shouting and dishonour must be lifted from you—every vice. ³² Become other-focused, well-disposed, gracious with each other, just as God in his anointed was gracious with us.

5 ¹ Become mimics of God, like children who are loved. ² Live in love, the way God's anointed loved us and handed himself over for our sake as an offering and life-gift, an aroma pleasing to God.

Whether in Camp Hill or Syria, the lust for power smells like death. Instead of grasping for power, Jesus gave himself—an aromatic gift of life.

Our words bear the scent of the power we speak for.

Ephesians 5

Sex and power (Eph 5:1–5)

How you love tells us how you use power.

Language expresses culture. Abusive language rises in a culture of abuse. “F. you” is so common that we no longer hear it as a curse, wishing sexual abuse on someone.

Four-letter words are the language of power and humiliation—a graphic verbal image of the powerful forcing themselves on the humiliated. It’s a snapshot of what’s wrong with the world, the culture of injustice.

There’s a world of difference between genuine love and screwing people over.

There is another way to live. The most powerful person in the universe modelled it in the way he responded to our resistance to his authority, our culture of injustice against each other. God did not use his power to humiliate the world, to bring it to its knees. God entered the world of injustice to suffer humiliation, crucifixion at the hands of those in power.

Ephesians 5:1-5 (original translation)

¹ Become mimics of God, like children who are loved. ² Live in love, the way God’s anointed loved us and handed himself over for our sake as an offering and life-gift, an aroma pleasing to God.

³ Among you, the holy people, there should be no accusation of sexual immorality, no uncleanness or greed, ⁴ no obscenity in foolish or smutty wit that doesn’t reflect who you are; only grateful speech. ⁵ You must know that everyone who is immoral, unclean or greedy (devoted to idols) has no inheritance in the kingdom of God and his anointed.

God’s people cannot live the way the nations do (4:17). The rulers of this world gain power by dominating their opponents. God’s anointed rescued us from this evil through powerlessness, selfless love, giving himself for us (5:2).

That’s why God’s people have a different sexual ethic. It’s not about seeking pleasure, but giving pleasure. It’s not about dominating, but giving mutual support. It’s not about using and discarding partners, but faithfully loving one through good and bad times (5:21-33). In short, it’s not about “fing” people, but self-giving devotion.

Christ’s kingdom has a different love language because it rests on a different power. Grace and gratitude are the language of a culture that honours serving each other the way our king served us. Smutty sex and revenge stories have no place; they belong to the culture of exploitation.

Where will you live? In the old world, the kingdom of the idols (money, sex, and power)? Or in the world that inherits what God intends: God’s pure, devoted, self-giving reign in Christ?

Live intentionally: you must know these cultures are incompatible.

The kingdom of Christ and God (Eph 5:5-7)

Making sense of this unique phrase.

Do you read this as a warning that you might not go to heaven?

Ephesians 5 ⁵ For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. (NIV)

It didn't mention heaven. Readers substitute *heaven* because that's how *kingdom of God* has been understood. But the Bible's narrative isn't about us going to heaven; it's about God's kingship being restored to earth.

We'll take it phrase by phrase, but first the backstory: the Bible's narrative of the kingdom of God.

The Bible opens with two realms under God's governance: heaven (where he lives) and earth (where we live). His decrees established the earth under heaven's authority, with people as agents of the king. But the guards of the palace garden attempted a coup. Instead of becoming gods, we came under evil. Our eternal sovereign didn't leave us to our fate; he's been working with us ever since to bring earth back under heaven's reign.

That's the whole Bible's story: Abraham, Israel, Moses, Sinai, Joshua and the Judges, David and his son Solomon, the failure of Israel's and Judah's kings to represent God, God's nation disintegrating at the hands of the nations, the promises of the prophets that God will still act to rescue his people and restore them into his reign.

The New Testament opens with the claim that Jesus is the son of David anointed by God to restore his people from their exile into his reign (Matthew 1:1-23). By the end of Matthew's Gospel account, Jesus has all authority in both realms (heaven and earth), with his kingship extending to the nations and our king present with us on earth until the age is complete (Matthew 28:18-20).

Jesus is the leader appointed by God (the Christ) to restore God's reign on the earth (our Lord). In the Old Testament, the sons of David were appointed to represent God's reign on earth, so the kingdom of God could be described as the reign of *the LORD and his anointed* (Psalm 2:2). That's the language of Ephesians 5:5—*the reign of his anointed and of God*.

This promise—the world restored into the reign of God through Christ—is the *inheritance* God has always intended for the earth. This inheritance is not yet fully present, but it is present in the people who give allegiance to God's anointed, who are being raised up in him (Ephesians 1:18-20).

So:

- *The kingdom of Christ and God* = the restoration of God's reign on earth through his anointed (King Jesus).
- *The inheritance* = what God has always intended for the earth, namely restoration of relationship as sons of our heavenly sovereign.
- Missing out on the inheritance = remaining as slaves under evil, not being emancipated to live in the reign of God in Christ (present and future).

The restoration of the inheritance began with Abraham. But by the end of the Old Testament, Israel doesn't have her inheritance because of disobedience. This is how the story unfolds:

Ephesians 5 ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷ Therefore do not become partners with them. (ESV)

Key phrases:

- *Empty words* = the belief that God isn't sorting out the oppression on earth, so you can do whatever you want. (You can at least understand why some of God's people took that approach after 600 years of exile and foreign rule.)
- *God's anger* = the opposite of the *empty words*. The God of the Bible is not implacable, unfeeling, or disengaged. God was angered by the nations showing no regard for his decrees and taking the land. He was angered by the children of Abraham who proved to be children of the disobedience too. God may be slow to anger, but he is engaged and he does respond to injustice in his time.
- *Sons of the disobedience* = the lawless nations AND the disobedient sons of Abraham: "Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath" (2:3).
- *Partners* = the people of God in partnership with the rulers of this world under evil instead of remaining true to God's kingship. The ultimate expression of this partnership was crucifying God's anointed (compare Acts 4:27).

God's kingdom in Christ cannot be like the nations (4:17). Harvey Weinstein responded to his conviction with, "How can this happen in America?" Whatever you expect in America, immorality, impurity, and greed cannot be the culture of the kingdom of Christ and God (5:5). We cannot live like that and inherit what God has promised.

God is emotionally engaged with his people. He knows those who recognize his anointed as our Lord and live under his kingship, and he is angered by those who reject his kingship and remain as the children of the disobedience.

Conclusion

There's nothing here about going to heaven when you die. It's about how we receive the inheritance God intended for the earth—life under his kingship, in his anointed ruler, the kingdom of Christ and God. Or not.

Bottom line: If you join yourself to the powers that resist God's reign, you'll never receive the inheritance God planned for us, the joy and justice of the world restored as the kingdom of Christ and God.

Ephesians 5:5-7 (original translation)

⁵ You must know that everyone who is immoral, unclean or greedy (devoted to idols) has no inheritance in the kingdom of God and his anointed. ⁶ Don't let anyone mislead you with meaningless talk: these are the things that bring God's anger on the descendants of the disobedience. ⁷ Do not become participants with them.

What others are saying

Miroslav Volf:

I used to think that wrath was unworthy of God. Isn't God love? Shouldn't divine love be beyond wrath? God is love, and God loves every person and every creature. That's exactly why God is wrathful against some of them. My last resistance to the idea of God's wrath was a casualty of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the region from which I come. According to some estimates, 200,000 people were killed and over 3,000,000 were displaced. *My* villages and cities were destroyed, *my* people shelled day in and day out, some of them brutalized beyond imagination, and I could not imagine God not being angry. ...

Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who *wasn't* wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful *because* God is love.²⁴

Light and dark (Eph 5:8-14)

No, this isn't just a call for ethical behaviour. It's a call to embody the brilliance of Christ's reign.

For a clear vision of what we're called to be, turn up the contrast:

Ephesians 5:8-14 (original translation)

⁸ Previously you were **darkness**, but now you are **light** in the Lord. Live as children of **light** ⁹ (since all goodness, justice and truth are the produce of the **light**), ¹⁰ turning out as the harvest that pleases the Lord. ¹¹ Don't participate in the fruitless efforts of the **dark**, but expose them. ¹² It's dishonouring even to talk about the stuff they want to keep hidden, ¹³ but it's all exposed by the **light**, ¹⁴ for the **light** shows everything for what it is. Therefore, this is the message: "Get up, sleeping one. Rise from the dead. God's anointed will shine on you all."

The imagery of light and darkness is found in many religions. For clarity in how Ephesians uses this metaphor, we'll start with a comparison with other religions. If you wish, you can skip down to the phrase-by-phrase explanation of the text.

Comparison

Different faith groups use the light/dark metaphor differently:

- In traditional **Chinese** belief, the path to peace is to accept what befalls you: the *yin* and the *yang*, dark things as well as bright, the bad with the good.

²⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* electronic edition (Zondervan, 2009) emphasis original.

- In **Zoroastrianism** (a Persian religion that predates Christianity), our lives are caught up in the dualistic conflict between spiritual forces: light versus dark, heat versus cold, good versus evil.
- In **Judaism**, everything (including light and darkness) was viewed as God's good creation in the Torah and Former Prophets. Light and dark were later contrasted in the poetry of the wisdom books and Latter Prophets (especially Job and Isaiah).
- In Jewish **apocalyptic** literature, light versus darkness became a prominent motif. For example, 1 Enoch 92:4-5: *They shall walk in eternal light. Sin and darkness shall perish forever.* As in Zoroastrianism, darkness was the influence of evil spiritual powers. Unlike Zoroastrianism, we cannot fight it off. Light can return to God's world only when God acts, pouring out his judgment on the darkness.
- The **Essene** community called themselves *the sons of light* and their enemies *the sons of darkness*. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran were multiple copies of the War Scroll (1QM, 4Q491–496). It instructed them to prepare for a war against the servants of Satan (Belial). This is how the War Scroll begins:

¹For the Instructor, the Rule of the War. The first attack of the **Sons of Light** shall be undertaken against the forces of the **Sons of Darkness**, the army of Belial: the troops of Edom, Moab, the sons of Ammon, ²the Amalekites, Philistia and the troops of the Kittim of Assyria. Supporting them are those who have violated the covenant. ...
⁶There shall be no survivors ⁷of all **Sons of Darkness**. ⁸Then the **Sons of Righteousness** shall shine to all ends of the world, continuing to shine forth until the end of the appointed seasons of **darkness**.²⁵

So, how does Ephesians compare with these perspectives?

- There is no overlap with the **Chinese yin/yang**. Both good and bad happens to us, but we don't mildly sit by and accept them. Our hope is in the Messiah who liberates the world from darkness to be the light of the Lord.
- There is overlap with the **Zoroastrian, apocalyptic, and Essene** view of darkness as a spiritual power. The nations that crushed Israel in Old Testament times were slaves to *the ruler of the kingdom of the air* (Ephesians 2:2).
- Unlike the **Zoroastrian** view, we cannot free ourselves by choosing light instead of darkness. We're powerless (dead) under the power of evil (2:1). It takes an act of God to save us (the apocalyptic view).
- Unlike the **apocalyptic** texts, the act of God that saves his people is not the pouring out of judgement on their enemies. God incorporated the nations in the Messiah's reign (2:11-13). The Messiah died in the conflict between good and evil, but when God raised him up he delivered a declaration of peace (2:14-17). In this way, the nations that were previously outside God's nation are established as his people (2:18-20) with

²⁵ Michael O. Wise, Martin G. Abegg Jr., and Edward M. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (New York: HarperOne, 2005), 147–148.

God among them (2:21-22). This was the surprising reveal to the apocalyptic mystery of what God would do with the nations (3:1-21).

- The **Essene** expectation for a war between the sons of light and the sons of darkness is misguided. We are not at war with other humans: *Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms* (6:12).

Explanation

So, this is how Ephesians 5:8-14 uses the metaphor of light and darkness:

You were darkness is a description of the Ephesian recipients. As predominately gentile, they had been outside the covenant people, in the kingdom of darkness.

Now you are the light of the Lord is their inclusion in the covenant people, in the Messiah.

Live as children of the light is a call to no longer live as the gentiles do (4:17), to stop fighting against God and his covenant people, to live as restored and unified community of the Messiah (4:1-6), maturing into the new humanity in him (4:11-16), reflecting his character (4:18-32) as God's holy people (5:1-7).

All goodness, justice and truth are the produce of the light. Before photosynthesis was a word, people knew that things grow better in the light than in the dark. The nourishing goodness we innately hunger for grows in the open, in the community of justice and truth, not hidden in the dark where people connive injustice and spin lies to gain power (expressions of the dark power).

Turning out as the harvest that pleases the Lord is the hope for humanity. The God who said, "Let there be light" blessed the earth with fruitfulness (Genesis 1:11-12, 28-29), but the world has been less than productive because of the darkness. The descendants of Abraham were God's planting, but they did not produce the harvest he hoped for (Psalm 80; Isaiah 5). In the Messiah, God's people finally prove to be the harvest that pleases him.

Don't participate in the fruitless efforts of the dark rests on the analogy that trying to grow anything in the dark is difficult and unproductive. Empires come and go. All the effort people put into grasping power instead of submitting to God is wasted: it all falls back into the ground and dies.

Expose them. How? Simply by being the light. We are not being asked to investigate the works of evil to publish critiques of the darkness. That would be a waste of effort (fruitless). We would be focused on the shame of the darkness instead of the glory of the Lord. No, we expose the works of darkness as fruitless and shameful simply by being the alternative, being the brightness of God's productive presence in his world.

That's the explanation that follows: It's dishonouring even to talk about the stuff they want to keep hidden, but it's all exposed by the light, for the light shows everything for what it is.

Therefore, this is the message: "Get up, sleeping one. Rise from the dead. God's anointed will shine on you all." The Christian message is not a critique of the darkness. It's the hope of God's dormant world coming to life in the light of the Messiah.

Once humanity went dark, but now we are light in the Lord. Let's live as the children of the light, fruitful lives, his harvest of goodness, justice and truth, pleasing not ourselves but the Lord who is the light that grows the crop.

Who is the sleeper? (Eph 5:14)

Hint: it's more than an individual.

What does this mean?

Ephesians 5 ¹⁴ This is why it is said: "Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." (NIV)

It's not an Old Testament quotation. Was it a baptismal formula, something early churches said as they laid someone back in the water and raised them up in the Lord? That's an attractive idea but it doesn't really work: *you* is plural, even though *sleeper* is singular. It seems the *sleeper* is a corporate entity, not a baptismal candidate.

While not a direct quote, it could be a distillation of Isaiah's extensive imagery of light and dark (Isaiah 54-62).

Light/dark in Isaiah

Previously, we noted that the light/dark metaphor in Ephesians 5:8-14 doesn't match Zoroastrianism, Jewish apocalyptic, or Qumran. Does it match Isaiah's usage?

When Assyria captured the northern tribes, Isaiah described Galilee as covered in *gloom ... darkness ... deep darkness* (9:1-2). It felt like they had died in the dust, waiting For God's wake-up call to rouse them to life (26:19).

When Babylon captured what was left, the people called to be a light for the nations ended up sitting in darkness (42:6-7). In exile they lament, We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows (59:9).

Israel was God's rescue project for the world, so God is displeased that there is now no justice on earth. He announces he will don his armour and fight for their release (59:15-18). Freeing his people gets his rescue project back on track for the nations too: *From the west, people will fear the name of the LORD, and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory* (59:19).

Since the Abrahamic project was for the benefit of the nations (Genesis 12:1-3) and Israel was established as God's mediator to the nations (Exodus 19:4-6), rescuing Israel from the nations puts salvation history back on track. Isaiah's salvation-history message works like this:

1. The nations are in darkness.
2. The nations capture Israel: God's people are captives in darkness.
3. God restores his people: God's people are the brightness of his presence.
4. The nations come to the light.

This is the light/dark metaphor in Isaiah. God's action at the heart of the problem (#3 resolving #2) also resolves the wider issue (#4 is the resolution to # 1). Like this:

Isaiah 60 ¹ Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.

² See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you.

³ Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn. (NIV)

When God overturns their captivity in darkness (#2), his brilliance shines in Zion (#3). The nations that were in darkness (#1) are now bathed in his light (#4). Restoring Israel ultimately restores the nations.

Isaiah unpacks this metaphor with images of the nations bringing tribute to Zion and proclaiming the praise of her sovereign (60:6). The restoration of Zion transforms the nations on all sides (60:6-14), so *foreigners rebuilt your walls and their kings will serve you* (60:10). Even the descendants of those who previously oppressed Israel bow to God's government (60:14).

This transformation is so pervasive that Isaiah calls it the end of violence (60:18). The darkness has gone because the LORD is their *everlasting light* (60:19-20). The LORD's Messiah decrees *release from darkness for the prisoners* (61:1).

Light/dark in Ephesians

The good news announced by Isaiah has arrived in Christ. He resolves the oppression for Israel and for the nations. As non-Jews, the Ephesians *were darkness* (5:8). They lived under the reign of evil (2:2), with the Jewish people who were also captives of the darkness (2:3). The Messiah joined them in death, and raised up his people in himself when he rose from the dead (2:5-7). His benevolence rescued the nations also (2:8), a peace-making proclamation that united Jews and gentiles in a new humanity in himself (2:11-22).

The multi-faceted wisdom of God solved both problems as once. Installing his Messiah solved the problem of God's people and the problem of the nations (3:1-12). Every family in the cosmos benefits from his reign (3:14-21).

The Ephesians who were outside the covenant people (*darkness*) are now the Messiah's covenant people (*light in the Lord*). As his people (*children of light*), they must *find out what pleases their Lord*, so they can fulfil their role i.e. participate in producing *the fruit of the light* as the community where his *goodness, righteousness and truth* grows on earth (5:8-10).

They can no longer participate in the violence and oppression that characterized the dark nations and threatened to extinguish the light. As the light they inevitably expose the destructive and fruitless activities of the darkness, even without talking about it (5:11-14).

The light/dark imagery in Ephesians matches the logic of the metaphor in Isaiah.

Conclusion

So, who is the *sleeper* being roused in 5:14?

It's the same call as Isaiah 60:1: *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you*. Isaiah's call was directed to Zion, calling her to respond as the LORD

lifted his people out of darkness into the brightness of his presence, with the hope that the nations would come out of darkness into her light.

The prophetic call in Ephesians extends beyond old Zion. The wake-up call is not only for Old Jerusalem, but for the nations as well. Those who *were previously darkness* are becoming *light in the Lord*. His call rouses everyone, both the covenant people ensnared by the darkness and the nations who were the darkness. The Christ-light is creating a new united humanity, calling all who were in darkness into the light of his reign.

The sleeper is more than old Zion. It's a new Zion—a whole world being raised out of death, into the Christ light. The sleeper is the entire creation to whom God issues his gospel call.

The gospel call (Eph 5:14-20)

How do we issue the gospel invitation? We agree the gospel is important, but we have different ways to get people to respond. Should we follow Billy Graham's approach, inviting people to respond to an altar call to be saved?

What's niggling me is that the New Testament letters tell us nothing of how to issue this important call. They seem to think the call comes from God.

We're in Ephesians, and it has no guidance on how to issue a gospel call to our neighbours. It speaks of God calling people:

Ephesians 1 ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has **called** you. (NIV)

Ephesians 4 ¹ As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the **calling** you have received. ... ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were **called** to one hope when you were **called**. (NIV)

The other NT letters do the same (e.g. Romans 8:28-30; 9:24-26; 1 Corinthians 1:9 24-26; Galatians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; 5:24; Hebrews 9:15; 1 Peter 1:15; 2:9, 21; 5:10; 2 Peter 1:3; Jude 1).

Even when the NT speaks of us partnering with God in announcing the good news, it's still God who issues the call, e.g.: *He **called** you to this **through our gospel*** (2 Thessalonians 2:14).

Now, you may be thinking, "Allen, you sound like a Calvinist." Calvinists have been saying this for centuries, but this approach doesn't require buying the whole TULIP farm. Calvinists conceive of God as issuing his call only to elect individuals. We're not going to resolve this in this survey, but election language doesn't have to be understood that way. It might be better to think of God as the gracious sovereign who is calling his earthly kingdom back under his kingship, rather than one who calls only certain elect individuals.

Consider God's corporate call to Zion: *Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you* (Isaiah 61:1). The presence of God among his people would then illuminate the nations too: *Nations will come to your light, and kingdom to the brightness of your dawn* (61:3).

God's call today is to more than Zion: he's calling the whole world out of death, into the Christ light:

Ephesians 5 ¹⁴This is why it is said:

“Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” (NIV)

As we saw, *sleeper* is a corporate entity. God is calling not only Zion but all nations to rise from death into corporate life in his anointed (Ephesians 2). But only God can call the dead to rise.

That’s why there’s no instruction on the mechanism we are to use for the gospel invitation. It isn’t our call.

Instead, what we’re called to do is to be the community that embodies what God is calling us to. This is the outcome:

Ephesians 5:15-20 (original translation)

¹⁵ So, take a careful look at how you [plural] live life, not as fools but as wise.

¹⁶ Emancipate the season, since these are the evil days. ¹⁷ Consequently, don’t become mindless blobs; understand what our Lord expects.

¹⁸ Don’t get drunk on wine, so you’re “wasted.” Let the Spirit fill you [plural],

¹⁹ so you speak to each other with praises and anthems and songs of the Spirit, the song and praise from your communal heart for your king, ²⁰ always expressing to God our Father our gratitude for everyone in the authority of our Lord, Jesus the anointed king.

The logic here is identical to Isaiah 61. As the Redeemer returns to Zion and issues his awakening call, she is filled with the brilliance of his reign, and that’s what draws the nations. As the Messiah’s people live in the wisdom of his reign (instead of the folly of life without him) we participate in God’s emancipation of this season, even while the rebellion against him is still present. So, the emphasis is on being the community that understands what our King has called us to: embodying the brilliance of his reign.

In the gospel of the kingdom, it is the king who calls creation back into his kingship. Only he can call people to *rise from the dead*. We are bearers of his good news, but we don’t need to design mechanisms to get people to respond to us.

We’d be better to pour our efforts into living as the community that’s responsive to his call, embodying his reign with peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, justice, joy in each other and gratitude for our king, empowered with his Spirit (5:18-20).

The best we can do to encourage people to answer his call is to embody the brightness of his reign.

Excursus: God’s couriers

Why don’t the NT letters teach us how to convert their neighbours?

The previous article stirred up some discussion when I suggested that it is God who issues the gospel call, so we don’t need to devise mechanisms to get people to respond. Let’s clarify.

Firstly, we are bearers of the good news—that God is calling all people back under his kingship in his anointed. God’s call is normally delivered through people. That’s not surprising, since we were designed to make God known in creation (his image).

A handful of NT texts explicitly refer to God making his call through us (though it's always God issuing the call). Our king has assigned specific tasks to different leaders, so there are good news couriers (evangelists), regal ambassadors (apostles), and so on (Ephesians 4:11). These aren't watertight tasks: a pastor can be asked to do the work of an evangelist (2 Timothy 4:5).

We're couriers of God's call, but a courier's task is to deliver the message, not design ways to get the recipient to respond. Paul was passionate about delivering God's call (2 Corinthians 5:20). He was also cautious about techniques of persuasion that would cause people to respond to him instead of to God (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). The altar call is a recent invention (started in the 1800s). Was it invented to get people to respond to us?

Instead of taking on the responsibility of getting people to respond to us, let's be couriers of God's call. God is calling for loyalty to his anointed leader (faith), reorientation to his kingdom vision (repentance), publicly identifying as brought to life in him (baptism), citizenship in his reign (obedience). Let's deliver God's call, trust his Holy Spirit to do the regenerative work, and see these responses to God as what matters. There's such joy when we see people who are no longer living for self but for him (John 13:35).

Just look at the scope of the call we (God's couriers) are asked to deliver. God isn't merely calling select individuals to personal salvation. Our sovereign is calling all people back into his governance where we should have been all along! This was his multi-millennia project with the Abrahamic family. The nation God established through Moses was God's demo for the nations. King David (God's anointed) represented God's reign on earth. Then, in the midst of their national failure, God sent his anointed ruler (Christ) who was rejected by his people and put to death in collusion with their oppressors. God raised him up out of death to the throne, so that's how God's anointed became our leader (Lord).

This is the gospel of the kingdom—the good news that God has released the world from oppression under sin, into the reign of his anointed. We are couriers of this good news: God calling everyone back into his kingship. As expressed in one of Paul's earliest letters, *God calls you into his kingdom and splendour* (1 Thessalonians 2:11).

So, *call* is the keyword for God inviting everyone into his kingship. A call from a king is a summons, a regal command. *Call* is a gentle word fitting how God restored his kingship (through the cross), but *command* might be the right word when dealing with powerful people. Addressing the elite in Athens, Paul said: *he now commands all people everywhere to repent* (Acts 17:30).

There's the scope. God's call is not for a few select individuals; it's for *all people everywhere*. God calls everyone to reorient (*repent*) to life under the one he has anointed to sort out everything that's wrong and restore justice to the planet (17:31).

God *calls* us to life in his anointed. One day, earth will be like that: every knee will bow and everyone will confess his kingship. Every enemy will be under his feet. That's the call God has issued. That's the hope we embody to the world.

We aren't there yet. Unlike earthly rulers, God is in no hurry and doesn't force himself on us. He continues to *call* the world into the kingship of his Christ.

What joy it is to live as the kingdom of the Messiah now, while God's call is still going out. We're privileged to be the picture in the present of what the whole world will be like when

everything is set right. If God is calling the whole world into life in his Messiah, we respond to God's call by living life now as his kingdom. That's the primary (and ultimate) way we respond to God's call.

And that's the reason the NT letters provide no instruction at all on how church people should convert their neighbours. The emphasis is entirely on being what God has called us to be (the community of the Messiah) because that's where the world is headed.

Ephesians 1–3 contains the most astounding gospel summary. Ephesians 4–6 says nothing about getting our neighbours to sign up. What it says is to live our calling:

Ephesians 4 ¹ As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the **calling** you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were **called** to one hope when you were **called**; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (NIV)

The role of the church is to be in the present what God has called the world to be in the end. Yes, we're couriers of God's good news, and it's being the good-news community that makes that hope credible—when people can see what the world looks like when it's restored in Christ.

All the ministers of Jesus' government are commissioned to lead his community into the mature expression of humanity in his kingship. Even the evangelists (4:11-13).²⁶

Happiness without harm (Eph 5:15-20)

When do you feel alive? I can understand people wanting to use substances to drown their sorrows, but sorrows turn out to be good swimmers.

If you're looking for an alternative way to come alive, how about this:

Do not get drunk on wine ... Instead, be filled with the Spirit.

This isn't random advice. It's part of a bigger story of how people who feel like the walking dead can come alive in our resurrected king (Ephesians 2:1-5).

The one thing that overpowers our pain is the life-generating work of the Holy Spirit bringing us to life in Christ. He's establishing a whole new society where our feelings of alienation are replaced with the music of life—Spirit-inspired songs of gratitude for the rescue that's underway, the restoration of humanity in the leader God has given us.

So, c'mon: God is calling us to let go of the brokenness and participate in being truly human together:

Ephesians 5:15–20 (NIV)

¹⁵ Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine,

²⁶ For a listing of "called" in the NT epistles, see <https://allenbrowne.blog/called-in-the-nt-epistles/>

which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, ²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Why raise this contrast at this point of the book? Why wine specifically? Is there anything in the Bible's larger narrative that would suggest this contrast?

The first person described as drunk on wine was Noah (Genesis 9:21). None of the 66 commentaries I checked made a connection with Noah as this point, but the comparison might make sense if we think in a Jewish framework.

- In Jewish thought (particularly in apocalyptic), Noah features as a saviour figure. When God acted to deal with the violence and corruption of creation, Noah was the head of a new humanity, a humanity that had been saved in him. That kind of language fits Jesus in Ephesians. Jesus is the saviour who raises up a new humanity out of corruption and death (2:1-10), a new humanity that encompasses all people (2:11-22). Jesus is the answer to the apocalyptic mystery of how God would judge the rebellious peoples when he saved his people (Ephesians 3).
- Noah recognized the LORD by building an altar and offering a sacrifice as a *pleasing aroma* to the LORD (Genesis 8:21). Ephesians 5:2 says Jesus offered himself *as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*. This is unique: nowhere else does the NT describe Jesus' death as a sacrificial fragrant offering.
- In response to Noah recognizing God, God decreed the restoration of the earth (Genesis 8:21-22). It had been *corrupted* (*šā·ḥāt* = ruined, unfit for purpose in 6:11-17), so God restored the blessing of *fruitfulness* (9:1). Ephesians described our way of life as *corrupted* (4:22). The *fruitless* deeds of darkness are contrasted with the *fruit* that grows in the light (Ephesians 5:9-11).
- In replanting the world in Noah, God's main concern was the problem of violence (Genesis 9:2-6). We might expect it anyway, but this has been a theme in Ephesians: dealing with anger (4:26), removing bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, slander, and malice (4:31).
- Noah misused the blessing of fruitfulness, drank himself stupid, and behaved shamefully (Genesis 9:20-23). This is classic folly in Jewish thought (e.g. Philo's treatise on wisdom/folly below). This wisdom/folly dichotomy is the immediate context of Ephesians 5:15-17: *not as unwise but as wise, ... not being foolish, but understanding what our Lord intends*.
- Drunkenness led Noah to curse the world God had blessed—an onerous curse of slavery among brothers (Genesis 9:24-27). The Spirit leads us to bless our brothers and sisters: *speaking to one another with psalms, and hymns, and songs of the Spirit*. It's the joyful gratitude for God's liberation of the planet into the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5:19-20).

The contrast is clear: getting drunk on wine led to demeaning behaviour and a cursed community under Noah. Being filled with God's Spirit leads to uplifting behaviour singing joyful songs as the community in Christ.

Whether in Noah's experience, the experience of others, or your own experience, we've seen enough of the way people try to drown their sorrows. It's time to leave that way of life behind, to enter the new world restored in Christ our king.

Don't follow Noah down into slavery. Follow Jesus, the one who can set us free and keep us free. In the power of the Spirit, we can do this together.

What others have said

Philo, *Planting* 140–147:

¹⁴⁰ Let us now consider the vine-planting of the just Noah which is a species of husbandry. For it is said that "Noah began to be a husbandman of the earth, and he planted a vineyard, and drank of the wine, and got drunk." Therefore, the wise man here cultivates with skill and science the tree of drunkenness, though fools enter upon its management in an unartistic and negligent manner. ...

¹⁴² Therefore, to get drunk is a matter of a twofold nature, one part of it being equivalent to being overcome with wine; the other, to behaving foolishly in one's cups. ...

¹⁴⁶ The wise man will never of his own accord think fit to enter upon a contest of hard drinking ... ¹⁴⁷ Unmixed wine is a poison, which is the cause, if not of death, at least of madness.²⁷

Fear of Christ? (Eph 5:21)

Is he scary?

Fear of Christ is a phrase found just once (Ephesians 5:21). It's the generic word for fear (*phobos*). Many translations render it as "reverence" or "respect", but that isn't strong enough. In a kingdom perspective, fear of Christ displaces every fear.

Old Testament

In the ancient world, people were expected to fear God and the authorities. Untrustworthy was anyone who feared neither God nor rulers, for they could knife you in the back. *Fear of the LORD* was the source of social intelligence, while fools lacked respect for his instruction (Proverbs 1:7). The LORD's wisdom was revealed in his Law (Torah). So, *to fear the LORD your God* meant *to follow carefully all the words of this Torah* (Deuteronomy 31:12).

²⁷ Philo of Alexandria, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged* edited by Charles Duke Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 203.

On earth, the Davidic king represented God's authority. In this chain of command, fearing the LORD (and living in his authority) implied fearing the king (and living in his authority). Note the contrast in Proverbs 24:21:

Fear the LORD and the king, my son,
and do not join with rebellious officials. (NIV)

New Testament

In the NT, this theme is less prominent but still present. *Fear of the Lord* motivates obedience (2 Corinthians 5:11; 7:1), while having *no fear of God* means living in rebellion (Romans 3:18). Since God set authorities in place, giving fear to God implies giving fear to rulers—even those outside the Davidic lineage (Romans 13:7). Roman imperial power was *God's servant for your good*, even though its sword was for killing (13:4), so doing the right thing was the best way to *not fear the authority* (13:3).

How much more, then, should we fear God's anointed ruler (Christ) who restores God's reign on earth (the kingdom of God). Jesus spoke of himself as *the Son of Man* when he spoke of his regal authority: his throne (Matthew 19:28; 25:31; 26:64), his judgement of all that is wrong (Matthew 19:28; John 5:27), and his restoration God's reign (Matthew 16:28; 24:30; 26:64). Jesus was the human (son of man) who lived in right relationship with heaven, and therefore the human to whom God could entrust the kingdom again. *Fear of the Lord* therefore implies *fear of Christ* (his anointed).

Did people fear Jesus? (Gospels)

So how scary is Jesus? It's quite a theme in the Gospels. Note what caused their fear:

1. When the storm subsided at Jesus' command, "In **fear** and amazement they asked one another, 'Who is this? He commands even the winds and water, and they obey him'" (Luke 8:25).
2. When Jesus freed the tortured soul among the tombs, the locals "asked him to depart from them, for they were seized with great **fear**" (Luke 8:37).
3. When Peter saw the miraculous catch, he felt unworthy. "Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Don't be **afraid**'" (Luke 5:10).
4. When Jesus raised the widow's son at Nain, "**Fear** seized them all, and they glorified God" (Luke 7:16).
5. When a woman was healed by touching Jesus' robe, she "came in **fear** and trembling and fell down before him and told him the whole truth" (Mark 5:33).
6. When Peter saw Jesus transfigured, "He did not know what to say, they were so **frightened**" (Mark 9:6).
7. When Jesus led the final procession to Jerusalem, "those who followed were **afraid**" (Mark 10:32). They recalled Zechariah's promise, "Do not be **afraid**, Daughter Zion; see your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt" (John 12:15).
8. When Jesus spoke out against the temple leaders, they "began looking for a way to kill him, for they **feared** him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching" (Mark 11:18).

9. When angels told the women Jesus was alive, “they hurried away from the tomb, **afraid** yet filled with joy” (Matthew 28:8). When the disciples saw Jesus, “they were startled and **frightened**” (Luke 24:37).

Did you see? Not a single case of being terrified of what Jesus might do to them, yet they were all full of fear at the authority Jesus carries. These people were accustomed to fearing Herod because Herod had imperial authority to subjugate them to himself and to kill them if they refused. But Jesus had greater authority over sickness and the natural world, over evil spirits and human rulers. Most frightening of all, he received power over death.

Anointed with power

Here's the difference between Jesus' authority and other authorities. Pilate was the highest ranking and most feared authority in Jerusalem. Behind him stood the armies of the Empire. Before him stood Jesus, accused of being the Son who carried God's authority on earth. Who was afraid?

John 19 ⁸ When Pilate heard this, he was even more **afraid**... ¹⁰ Pilate said, “Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?” (NIV)

Pilate's fear revealed the source of his authority—his power to kill. This power fell when Jesus rose from the grave—the Christ, with all authority in heaven and on earth.

Christ's power is terrifying! But he is not a terror. He is the restoration of the world—out of its fearful oppression, into the reign of God's anointed. Christ's fearfulness is not a sword; it's a decree—a word from his mouth calms the storm, releases the slaves, restores the earth, defeats every enemy (even death).

Fear of Christ is not a threat; it's a promise. It doesn't petrify us into inaction or servitude; it stimulates us to spend our lives for the community of God's appointed ruler.

Like shadows fleeing from the light, every other fear vanishes in the fear of Christ.

Kingdom lifestyle: submitting to each other (Eph 5:21)

The gospel calls us into an alternative world.

Some of my friends struggle with “Submit to each other” (Ephesians 5:21). So many people have been subjected to abuse, humiliation, and injustice that subjecting them to anything further feels like more grief.

Other friends find submission natural. God is the authority, with all authorities under him, so of course Christians must be submissive.

How do you feel about this command?

Would your reaction tell me how you vote? Maybe radicals want to change the world by overthrowing the current injustice instead of submitting to it, while conservatives like the stability that comes from submitting to the current authorities?

Funny how our gospel is shaped by our political agenda. For some, the gospel demands the restructure of society now. For others, the gospel is more about getting everyone ready for

the next world than changing this one. But the gospel refuses to conform to our politics. The gospel announces an alternative politic—a way of life based on Jesus' leadership.

Christ is the alternative ruler, the king who changes all kingship. He's in no hurry to overthrow the current rulers, and yet his kingdom is changing everything. It's the mustard seed that grew to fill the garden and is now morphing into a tree that fills the world and shelters its creatures.

The trouble is that people submit to the powerful out of fear. That's true in politics and economics, in communities and families, all the way down to the animal food chain and the pecking order of seagulls.

But this verse does not tell us to submit to powerful people out of fear of them:

Ephesians 5 ²¹ Submit to one another in fear of Christ.

Christ is never terrorizing, though realizing his authority can be terrifying. He submitted himself to us—*giving himself up for us* (5:2). The king sets the paradigm for relationships in his kingdom, so we submit to each other as he submitted himself to us (5:24). We love each other as he loved us. We give ourselves up for each other as he gave himself up for us (5:25).

Mutual submission is a new and challenging way of life. It's counter-intuitive in a world where the goal of life often is to dominate each other. That's the point!

This is the hope of the world. Placing ourselves under each other in fear of Christ is how we introduce the kingdom of God lifestyle to the earth.

At home with the gospel (Eph 5:21-33)

The gospel is good news ... if it works. We announce Jesus as the Saviour who ends our hostilities and unifies humanity (Ephesians 2:11-17). How is this working out at your place?

Life is different in the kingdom where we treat each other the way our king treats us. Having Jesus in charge reunifies and reshapes our humanity (Ephesians 4:1-16). The good news reframes how we relate (4:17 – 5:20), how we live at home (5:21 – 6:9), and how we interact with those who don't yet recognize Jesus' authority (6:10-23).

In short, Ephesians 4–6 is applied gospel. When we make it about being a better self or getting a better life, we've lost the core. There are myriads of books and courses on how to get a better marriage based on 5:21-31. The worst titles like *Have a New Husband by Friday* are selling selfishness. No wonder divorce rates among Christians aren't much different to the wider community. That's a different gospel to the one about the cross.

Ephesians 5 is not marital advice. It's not household code or moral rules. It's a call to live the gospel at home.

That's counter-cultural. My Facebook feed tried to sell me a coffee mug today. I'm supposed to buy it for the wife, but it's not about her. It proclaims my ego: "I'm not perfect. I'll annoy you ... but you'll never find anyone who loves you as much as I do." How many of our love songs are like that? The lyrics are all about me, how I feel, and how you make me feel. I don't think you could write a Country and Western song where the crucified Jesus complains, "You don't treat me right."

The gospel calls me to give my life to my wife as fully as Jesus gave his life for me. It calls her to give her life to me with the same Christocentric cruciform love. The gospel expects mutual submission as our response to Christ (5:21).

Verse 22 is interesting because there's no verb. The Greek text says simply, "Wives, to your own husbands as to the Lord." Since the previous verse calls for mutual submission, the notion of a wife submitting to her husband is an application of a gospel lifestyle. A husband submitting to his wife is also an expression of gospel lifestyle: it's what Christ did for us.

It's a mistake to make these verses about the differences between the sexes, as if men are from Mars and women are from Venus. It's not contrasting males and females; it's contrasting the me-focused culture of the broken world with the sacrificial culture of the redeemed world in Christ.

Please don't follow those who treat the examples in 5:21-33 as biological differences. Wives are told to *respect* their husbands, and husbands to *love* their wives, but that doesn't imply that men have more fragile egos (needing respect) while women are more emotionally needy (needing love). We could discuss the honour/shame paradigm of the first century when males did receive greater respect, but that has nothing to do with the message of this text (gospel lifestyle). The examples are interchangeable: they're about mutual submission. Men and women both need love and respect. A man who treats his wife disrespectfully is not reflecting Christ, in the same way that the woman who treats her husband unlovingly is not reflecting the gospel lifestyle.

This passage is not about male/female differences; it's about unity. The profound mystery of marriage is its oneness—two people with one life (5:31). Gender wars are an expression of human brokenness. The good news is that God has ended the hostility and put us back together. That's as true of the gender divide as the ethnic divide: "He himself is our peace, making from the two one" (2:14).

Many people feel stuck in Humpty Dumpty's world where no one can put us back together. Make sure Christ has the last word at your place.

Ephesians 5:21-33 (a rather literal translation)

²¹ Place yourselves under each other, in fear of Christ. ²² Wives, do this for your own husbands as you do for the Lord, ²³ since a husband is head of his wife as also the Christ is head of the assembly, himself the Saviour of the body; ²⁴ but as the assembly places itself under the Christ, in the same way also the wives to their husbands in all things.

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives in the same way also that Christ loved the assembly and gave himself over for her, ²⁶ so as to make her holy, bathed and purified by his declaration, ²⁷ so as to make the royal presentation to himself of his splendid assembly—unmarred, unwrinkled, nothing to detract from her, so she could be holy and flawless.

²⁸ In the same way, the men are obliged to love their own wives as they do their own bodies. Anyone who loves his own wife is loving himself. ²⁹ For no one is hateful of his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it the way the Christ loves the assembly, ³⁰ because we are parts of his body.

³¹ “For this reason, a person will leave father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two will be one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery, but I am saying this in relation to Christ and the assembly. ³³ However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and the wife fear her husband.

The divine romance (Eph 5:31-32)

God's love story for humanity

To us, history can feel like a war story. To God, it's a love story. Not a cheap coming-of-age novel, a fully-fledged romance of love overcoming tragedy.

There's this beautiful moment in the beginning when God makes the human aware that we were designed for shared life. With the wide-eyed wonder of a child at the zoo, Adam was discovering the mind-boggling diversity of creatures who shared God's world with him. But along with the serendipity was another feeling, a growing disquiet awakening within him. There was no one else like him, no soulmate to share all this wonder. (Genesis 2:18-20).

Having aroused the sense that we exist for each other, God moves to provide what's missing. It's his most beautiful creative act: taking some of Adam's own flesh and bone to form someone who quite literally *is* him—“bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh” (2:23). Each generation experiences this unity of body and life as a man and a woman leave their families to discover their identity in one shared life (2:24).

Well, that's the ideal version. The reality is more difficult, with more selfishness and pain.

As the author of Ephesians pondered the profound mystery of a united life, it occurred to him that the gospel is that kind of unfolding love story. God had breathed his own life into us (Genesis 2:7), but when we separated from God to go our own way, we lost our life (2:17; 3:19). We were “dead in transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1).

God's response is a truly astounding revelation of his character. He doesn't react like an offended ruler to quash people under his power. He steps into the mess with his people.

In God's love story, the Son leaves his Father's home to join himself to his bride in her dead existence. He lays down in the dust, so she can have his life. When he rises from the sleep of death, she is coming to life in him. *God raised us up with Christ.* (Ephesians 2:6).

Sharing in his resurrection life is the most transformative experience for humanity. *Christ* means anointed ruler, so to share his life is to be his bride, his queen *seated with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus* (2:6).

So, the love story culminates with the king surrounded by the magnificent queen he has raised up. She is:

bathed and purified by his declaration, so as to make the royal presentation to himself of his splendid assembly—unmarred, unwrinkled, nothing to detract from her, so she could be holy and flawless (5:26-27).

History is his love story, the story of a Son leaving his Father to be united with his bride, joining her in her death, giving her his life, and raising her up to reign with him in his recreated world:

Ephesians 5 ³¹ “For this reason, a person will leave father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two will be one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery, but I am saying this in relation to Christ and the assembly.

Being loved like this transforms us. The fear of Christ teaches us to submit to one another. How’s the divine romance working out where you live?

What others are saying

Gene Edwards:

Angels stood dumbstruck, watching man cease to be one,
and yet remaining one.

“You see,” said the Lord softly,
“there is something ... *someone* hidden *in* Adam.”²⁸

²⁸ Gene Edwards, *The Divine Romance* (Tyndale, 1984), 17.

Ephesians 6

Raising children (Eph 6:1-4)

Love children? You have something in common with God. He calls them to join in representing his kingdom life on earth:

Ephesians 6:1-4 (NIV)

¹ Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² “Honour your father and mother”—which is the first commandment with a promise—³ “so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”

⁴ Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Every child is a life full of promise. I can't look at a baby without wondering what this life will bring. Each one arrives with their own giftings from God. Just as gardeners recognize different seeds and plant them where they can flourish, parents recognize each child's uniqueness and help unfold their potential.

But parenting can feel like a tough gig. We're conscious of our own failings, and we want better for our kids. We struggle to find the balance between being too strict or too lenient. How do you decide?

This text doesn't say you have to be a better parent. It doesn't demand you to get your kids under control so they don't shame themselves or you. It's full of promise.

The fifth Commandment came with a promise attached. When children respond respectfully to their parents, they end up living the blessing that Star Trek could only wish for: live long, and prosper.

The core commandments God gave Israel reveal that, at least when it comes to children, God prefers rewards rather than threats. The Heavenly Father inspires children with the promise of a world where people live well and live long.

And God's approach to parents here is similar. God doesn't treat us as bad parents. He doesn't tell us to get those kids under control. The one thing he asks of us is not to exasperate our children.

When I think back over how I raised my boys, I exasperated them when they felt they couldn't attain what their Dad expected of them. We are to be careful not to demand too much of them, because God doesn't want his little ones becoming embittered or discouraged (Colossians 3:21).

Next time you feel unsure whether to be lenient on the kids or to make them measure up, God's advice is, “Don't exasperate them.”

No, that doesn't mean letting them do whatever they want. You also want to nourish them with the training and instruction of the Lord. When they grow up and no longer answer to you, they'll be empowered to answer to their Heavenly Father.

At the heart of parenting is the realization that we're modelling the Heavenly Father to our children. And he isn't someone who exasperates his children.

God sees our children as full of promise. We're leading them towards a world where they can live well and live long because of Messiah's reign.

That's why God calls us to raise them, not put them down.

Why doesn't the Bible condemn slavery? (Eph 6:5-9)

Have you wondered?

Why does the New Testament accept slavery, when treating another person as property is inhuman?

Ephesians 6 ⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. (NIV)

Why require slaves to live in a way that falls far short of the kingdom of God, a society where everyone treats each other the way God treats us in Christ? Ultimately, injustice must yield to Christ's reign, so why doesn't the New Testament call us to speak out against institutionalized systemic injustice?

In the big arc of the Bible's narrative, slavery is wrong. The Bible begins with humans equal under God (Genesis 1:26-27), and the first time slavery appears it's labelled as a curse (Genesis 9:25). The Bible concludes with the powers of evil falling, when avarice ceases and no longer are "human beings sold as slaves" (Revelation 18:13).

So why doesn't the New Testament call God's people to condemn slavery? The tough questions are our friends, friends that challenge and reshape our understanding.

Let's see if we can make sense of what Paul's saying by examining what he did.

When Paul released a slave

There's one example of Paul setting a slave girl free. According to Acts 16:16, she "earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling." Paul realized she was enslaved by a spirit, so he used the authority of King Jesus to release her (16:18). The slave owners "realized that their hope of making money was gone" (16:19), so they had Paul and Silas arrested, charged with upsetting the ordered life of the city and "advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice" (16:21).

Slavery was enshrined in Roman law. If Paul and Silas took on the fight against this injustice, it would have become their life work. They could no longer have travelled from place to place to proclaim the good news of an alternative kingdom under the leadership of God's anointed ruler (Acts 28:31).

Paul knew that the slave/free distinction would eventually disintegrate in the reign of King Jesus (Galatians 3:28), so he spent no time fighting it. He spent all his time calling people to recognize Jesus' leadership, to come under his authority. The reign of King Jesus will resolve all injustices.

When Paul returned a slave

In his many imprisonments, Paul would have met runaway slaves who'd been recaptured. He knew how their masters would make an example of them to deter any others in the household who might have the crazy idea of seeking freedom. On one occasion, as Paul heard the slave's story, he recognized the slave owner—a man named Philemon. Philemon had given his allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ through Paul's preaching.

Paul had no way to stop the Roman authorities returning the slave to his owner, so he wrote a letter for the slave to carry with him. It's such a warm letter, saturated with the human affection Paul feels for Philemon. And for the slave!

He's not just a slave; he has a name. Paul asks Philemon to treat Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord." (Philemon 16).

Curious! Paul hasn't attacked the institution of slavery. He's undermined it. Onesimus might be a slave in the eyes of Rome, but in Philemon's eyes he is a fellow human, a brother in the family.

Now comes the masterstroke to ensure the Christ-perspective transforms this relationship. When the returned slave arrives at the door, Philemon is not to shame him and make an example of him. He's to hug him and show him the same affection as if Paul himself had turned up (v.17)—something akin to the prodigal son's return. Philemon is to release Onesimus from the social debt incurred by running away (v.18), on the basis that Philemon owes Paul a huge social debt for saving his life (v. 19). If Paul came back for a visit, Philemon would give him the guest room (not the slave quarters), so Paul calls Philemon to treat Onesimus like that (v.22).

Paul didn't condemn slavery in the Roman Empire. He focused his efforts on those who give allegiance to King Jesus, knowing that enduring social transformation can only come serving him.

How to overcome injustice

It hurts to watch real people being hurt by injustice, devalued as less than human, crushed by profits, politics, and power, especially when the injustice is violently or systemically enforced. But evil cannot be fixed by condemning it, exposing how bad it is, demanding people do better. The broken social systems of this world are beyond repair.

God's method for dislodging sin's grip on the world was not condemning it; he shouldered it, bearing it himself on the cross. It is irrational for the church to demand people who don't recognize King Jesus behave as if they did. Sure, it's easy to shame leaders for their evil choices, but that won't change the world. We need to spend our finite resources calling people to recognize the one ruler who can change the world.

That's why the Bible doesn't condemn slavery. There's no hope in trying to make a better Roman Empire. The only hope is in living as the kingdom of God.

So instead of condemning slavery, the Bible transforms this unjust relationship by calling both sides into mutual submission to each other as servants of King Jesus:

- Slaves, work as if you were serving Jesus as your master (Ephesians 5:5-8).

- Masters, transform the way you treat your slaves in light of how your Master treats you, because he doesn't see them as any less than you (Ephesians 5:9).

The world is transformed not by condemning sin, but by bringing people to give their allegiance to King Jesus, so we treat each other as he treats us. That's the goal of the gospel.

Our mission is the same as one given to Jesus:

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him (John 3:17).

What others are saying

John Chrysostom (AD 347 – 407), *Homily On Ephesians 22.6.9*:

Society arrangements, like laws made by sinners, acknowledge these distinctions of classes. But we are all called to accountability before the law of the common Lord and Master of all. We are called to do good to all alike and to dispense the same fair rights to all. God's law does not recognize these social distinctions. If anyone should ask where slavery comes from and why it has stolen into human life—for I know that many are keen to ask such things and desire to learn—I shall tell you. It is avarice that brought about slavery. It is acquisitiveness, which is insatiable. This is not the original human condition.²⁹

The armour of God (Eph 6:10-17)

How useful is this old armour? Depends who you're fighting.

Defence is a big deal. Globally, we think it's worth \$1.8 trillion dollars each year.

When Christians talk about putting on a breastplate and helmet, taking up a sword and shield, it sounds pretty lame against piloted drones and guided missiles. Do you think technology wiping out Christianity?

Truth is, the Christians' armour would have sounded lame in the first century too. Rome was the superpower of their world, and the Romans soldiers were legendary at supporting Caesar's reign. For any community to support another king was suicidal.

Yet, Christians were openly proclaiming that God had set someone else on the throne, "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked" including Caesar's (Ephesians 1:21). The gospel—the good news that Jesus is Lord and reigns over all nations—placed Christians at loggerheads with the existing authorities. Caesar also described himself as *good news* for the world, its *lord*, and *saviour* of its people.

²⁹ M. J. Edwards (ed.) *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 8:206

Whose “gospel” would win out? Did Rome have the force to keep its power over the world in the face of the Christians’ claims? Who would win if the hoplites (heavily armed soldiers) fought the Christians over who runs the world?

- Hoplites hold their armour together with a belt that supports their sword.
Christians have nothing but truth to support their cause.
- Hoplites have breastplates to protect them from deadly blows.
Christian defence relies only on what’s right.
- Hoplites in heavy armour could not move quickly.
Christians are quick on their feet, quick to carry the good news that Jesus reigns everywhere they tread.
- Hoplites lock their shields together to form a protective wall (as riot squads do today).
Christians live openly, trusting God to extinguish the flaming arrows.
- Hoplites have helmets to save their heads.
Christians think God will save the world.
- Hoplites advance by cutting people down with their swords.
Christians advance by stepping into what God has decreed.

What a mismatch! Yet, with all its wars to force the world under its power, the Roman Empire came and went as human powers always do. And the reign of Christ extended from Jerusalem to Europe, to Africa, to Asia, to the ends of the earth.

Today, one third of the world’s people give their allegiance to King Jesus, not at the point of a sword, but willingly recognizing him as the Lord who can save the world.

That’s the reason our king never gave us weapons to fight Caesar. We’re in a war over who runs the world, but Caesar is not our enemy. The rulers who conduct wars and kill people to get power in this world are mere humans, themselves slaves of evil:

Ephesians 6 ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (NIV)

Those of us who long for justice can grow impatient with the rulers of this world and the murderous drones and missiles they use to enforce their power. I’ll confess to reacting angrily last week when the president of one of the world’s largest economies threatened to cut funding to the World Health Organization in the middle of a pandemic. As Bill Gates said, that’s as dangerous as it sounds. But I chose not to post my angry reaction on social media. That would dilute and pollute the message I want the world to hear: the good news that Jesus is our true ruler.

Despite all their hubris, people like Trump and Putin are not the enemies of Christ’s kingship. They’re just slaves of the forces of evil that don’t want to yield to the one whom God has anointed as our ruler. Fighting them is wasted effort. You’ll feel aggrieved at their injustice but don’t expect them to save the world. They come and go, but the hope of the world is the one to whom God has given the kingship, Christ Jesus our Lord. He alone is the one we trust to liberate the world.

God gave us no armour for fighting drones and laser weapons, but he has given us the armour we need to fight for Jesus' kingship. We learn how to use it by looking to our Commander in Chief. It's called *God's armour (the armour of God)* because it's what God himself wore when he stepped in to overthrow the ruler of this world. (More on that next time.)

For further thought

The inscription below is from a monument erected at Priene (south of Ephesus in Asia Minor) about 9 BC. Augustus Caesar claims his reign is *good news* for the world. Yes, the word is *euangelion*, the word for "gospel." That's what "gospel" meant in Ephesus.

Caesar was said to be:

... a **saviour**, both for us and for our descendants, that he might **end war** and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance excelled even our anticipations, surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the **god** Augustus was the beginning of the **good tidings** for the world ...

Be careful not to get side-tracked into fighting the rulers of this world. No matter how unjust their actions or how blasphemous their power claims, God has not equipped us to fight them. Fighting them is counter-productive: only the good news of Jesus can displace evil.

When did God wear armour? (Eph 6:11)

Armour of God? When did he wear it?

The armour of God: something God provides for us, or something God himself wears?

Isaiah 59:17 describes the LORD putting it on:

He put on righteousness as his breastplate,
and the helmet of salvation on his head.(NIV)

When did God put armour on? Understanding how God used it might help us to use it too.

Isaiah was speaking to Israel, the nation through whom God was rescuing all nations. But the nations invaded, cut off the Davidic kings who represented God's reign, and took their inheritance (the land). As they served empire after empire, they began to see that these enemies were being driven by an Enemy (*satan* in Hebrew). This *Satan* used the armies of the nations to keep God's people oppressed, to frustrate God's plans to save the world through them.

Those who understood this stopped fighting their enemies in the way David and the kings had done. Prophets and apocalyptists declared that God would defeat their Enemy, release his people, and complete his global restoration project.

The truth is that God always reigned over the whole earth. But that truth was nowhere to be found in Isaiah's day. Even those who rejected evil had become a prey of the powers that

seemed to run the world, so there was no justice. Realizing his people were unable to fulfil their mission, God declared that he would step in and fight to restore justice on earth:

Isaiah 59:15–17 (NIV)

¹⁵ **Truth** is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey.

The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice.

¹⁶ He saw that there was no one,

he was appalled that there was no one to intervene;

so his own arm achieved salvation for him,

and his own righteousness sustained him.

¹⁷ He put on **righteousness as his breastplate**,

and the **helmet of salvation** on his head.

What an astounding promise! When did God do this? When did we see God putting on his armour to fight for his people, to save them from oppression and restore justice to the earth by bringing it back under his reign?

I suggest God did this in his Son. Jesus knew the enemy of God's people was not Herod or Pilate or the armies of Caesar. He insisted his followers treat the Roman soldiers not as enemies but as friends—friends for whom you'd be glad to carry their packs an extra mile.

Jesus confronted the temple leaders for misrepresenting God, but never treated the Roman Empire as their enemy. Their real Enemy had oppressed God's people for many generations, through many empires. Attacking Caesar would be pointless. Jesus' task was to dislodge the power behind the powers: *Now is the time for judgment on this world; now **the prince of this world** will be driven out* (John 12:31).

Unlike Ned Kelly, Jesus never forged ploughshares into armour. Against this Enemy, Jesus needed the armour Isaiah had described. The **helmet** Jesus trusted was salvation—God saving the earth from oppression under evil, back into God's governance ... even if Jesus himself was not saved from death. The **breastplate** Jesus relied on was divine justice—his trust that the ruler of the earth would do right ... even if Jesus himself died in the battle.

When God donned his armour to overthrow evil and save his world, he looked incredibly vulnerable. Stripped in humiliation, flogged and bleeding from his wounds, he seemed to be the picture of powerlessness. "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked incredulously.

Jesus explained that he wasn't a terrorist trying to overthrow Rome. His kingship came not by defeating Rome, but by divine appointment. Jesus was born to be king, not by raising an army and forcing people to submit, but by leading people to recognize the truth God had decreed about his reign: "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (John 18:36-37).

The *truth* Jesus referred to is the divine decree that he is earth's king. This *truth* is the foundation of God's restoration project for the world. That's what *the truth* is in Ephesians: the good news that Jesus is king:

- The message of **truth** is the good news of your rescue (Ephesians 1:13).
- The message about the Anointed is the **truth** that's in Jesus (4:21).
- *The belt of truth* is the foundational garment of God's armour (6:14).

In Christ, we saw God donning his armour to free the world from oppression by evil. The foundational *truth* is the kingship God gave to his anointed ruler, his Christ. The breastplate he wore was his conviction that God's justice, what was *right* for the world, would come not

by crushing everyone into servitude, but by doing *right*—the king giving his life for the realm. The helmet he trusted was God’s promise to *save* the world from oppression under evil, rescuing it into God’s reign through him.

That’s how God used his armour. Does that help us understand how to use it too? That’s our next topic.

Using God’s armour (Eph 6:13-17)

How does God’s armour help us survive?

The final section of the Ephesian letter explains how we’re to live as the kingdom of God in a world where not everyone recognizes Jesus’ kingship yet. Those who claim to have power don’t relinquish it easily, so it’s a volatile conflict. That’s why we need armour.

History is full of examples of people killing for power. Just look what they did to our king! Jesus didn’t treat those who killed him as his enemy. He saw them as slaves of the Enemy of God’s reign, pawns who did not understand what they were doing.

As we proclaim that Jesus is Lord of all, we find ourselves in conflict with powerful interests. Syndicated crime doesn’t want justice destroying their profits. Political mavericks want fame and glory for themselves. Globalized business wants money from poorer nations in their pockets, selling everything from pharmaceuticals to weapons of war. Powerful interests do not want a king who takes power from the powerful, who gives the kingdom to the poor, who gives justice to the suffering, who ends weapon sales by bring peace to the earth.

Proclaiming Jesus’ kingship makes us an enemy of those who currently have power. But they are not our enemy. Our struggle is not against these flesh-and-blood people, but against the powers they serve, the evil that enslaves and deceives them. We are not opposing these people, so God gave us no armour to defend ourselves against them. He gave us armour to stand against the lies that underpin them, the spiritual forces that want to block Jesus’ kingship on earth, the same Enemy that worked to crush God’s people in Old Testament times.

Belt of truth

Truth is the first casualty in war. The devil’s propaganda is that the nations are better off resisting God’s kingship and harming his people. That’s his goal: *deceiving the nations* (Revelation 20:3, 8).

But the *truth* is the good news that Jesus reigns, that he is rescuing the world from its oppression, to be what it was designed to be—the kingdom of God. This gospel truth is the foundation of our armour, the good news message that holds everything together.

The gospel truth undoes the devil’s propaganda.

Breastplate of righteousness

Facing a war against his authority on earth, God did no evil towards us. He put on the breastplate of righteousness, stepped into the warzone, suffered at our hands, and died as a casualty of earth’s war against his reign. God’s righteousness overruled our condemnation

and execution of his Christ, raising his regal Son from the dead and installing him as our ruler.

In the same way, we can do no evil against those who do evil. Agents of King Jesus have only right actions available to us in this conflict. We can never use violence or the methods of evil. We're enacting God's justice, following the Lamb who is leading the world into God's right reign.

Shoes ready with the gospel of peace

The *gospel of peace* is the proclamation that the war is over, that we've all been brought together as one new humanity in the reign of God's anointed who is our peace (2:14-17).

Everywhere we tread, we carry and enact this peace message, the amnesty proclaimed by King Jesus for his earthly realm, the reconciliation of the whole world with our sovereign and with each other. Peace on earth.

Shield of faith

Faith is believing God's declaration that Jesus is his appointed ruler (his Christ), giving our allegiance to the one God has installed to lead humanity (our Lord).

This faith is a *shield* because we shelter in his reign (Psalm 18:2, 30, 34). Satan's flaming arrows are snuffed out by the protective reality of Jesus' kingship.

Helmet of salvation

God saves. That's the meaning of Jesus' name. He's saving the earth from oppression under evil, restoring it as a kingdom of God.

Jerusalem had fallen to the nations in Old Testament times, but when God put on his helmet, *the Redeemer came to Zion* (Isaiah 59:17, 20). He saved them, forming a new Jerusalem. In John's vision, this restored capital of God's government filled the whole of the known world (Revelation 21).

This saving work of God—rescuing the planet into Jesus' kingship—protects our heads from the enemy's lies.

Sword of the Spirit

All of this comes together in the final weapon: the sword of the Spirit, the word God has spoken, the decree of the Spirit that restores earth as God's realm in the reign of the Son.

We discuss this weapon in the next article.

Conclusion

The armour of God enables the people of God to overcome the deceiver of the nations, so that Christ wins the war and God's reign of the earth is realized.

The armour doesn't guarantee no casualties. Peter, Paul, and other apostles died at the hands of the rulers of this world. That's still happening in places today. But God's armour does win the war. Ultimately Christ is king of all. That's why we rely on what God himself wore: the *truth* of what he said, doing *right* if it kills us, proclaiming his *peace*, *trusting* his kingship, instantiating his *saving* power, with the *Spirit's decree* restoring the world.

Don't fight human rulers; they aren't the enemy. Don't try to fix the present injustice; it's beyond repair. Stand for what God has declared.

This is how we're empowered by our Lord and his mighty reign (6:10).

Sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:17)

The Spirit's sword isn't for cutting people down; it's for cutting them free.

The final piece of armour is *the sword of the Spirit*. It's described as *the word of God*, so some of us have thought of it as the Bible. That's not how the Ephesians would have understood it when they received this letter: they didn't have Bibles.

The word of God is everything our heavenly sovereign decrees for his earthly realm. What God declares is a *sword* because it cuts through any opposing force.

When God said, "Let there be light," there was light because God decreed it. When darkness engulfed God's world, the Word became flesh and dwelled among us in the brightness of his glory. The dark powers could not overwhelm him, for the Word was God. Jesus is God's decree for the world (John 1:1-14).

Rebels killed God's anointed ruler, but the Spirit of holiness did not allow this evil to stand. The Spirit spoke a word that cut through the enslaving powers, piercing death itself, raising up God's anointed ruler, appointing this Son of David as ruler over us all (Romans 1:4).

The word of God—God's declaration that Jesus is Lord and the earth is rescued in him—cuts through every other power claim. God's anointed speaks with the Spirit's authority, so a mere whisper on his lips overcomes rebellion against his reign (Isaiah 11:4).

The Spirit's declaration—the powerful life-giving word that raised Jesus from the dead—is now at work in us too: raising us up with Christ, animating us as sons of God, the community alive in the Son (Romans 8:11).

Human rulers use swords to make war, to kill people who won't yield to their power. The Spirit uses his sword not to cut people down but to cut them free from oppressive powers, not so they die but so they live in the reign of Christ.

With modern technology, we've created many weapons of war, but no weapons of peace. The sword of the Spirit is the only weapon that frees without killing, that brings us together as one world under the ruler decreed by God.

So, how do we wield the Spirit's sword? Not merely by quoting Bible verses at people, but as ambassadors announcing Christ's kingdom. We're heralds of the good news that God has raised him from the dead and installed him as our king, calling everyone to place their allegiance in God's anointed and live under his kingship.

The sword of the Spirit is in our mouths as we proclaim and embody the living declaration of Christ's kingship. This is the sword that sets people free, the Spirit's word that regenerates people out of death, into life in the reign of Christ.

That's the life-giving peace-making power of the Spirit's sword in our mouths.

What others are saying

Rudolf Schnackenburg:

Possibly the author of Eph. has in mind the passage in Is. 11:4 where ‘word’ and ‘breath’ (πνεῦμα) stand parallel in the description of the coming Messiah. Already in v. 14a (girding with truth) he has drawn from the following passage in Is. 11:5. Thus here again a statement about the Messiah is transferred to God’s soldier. The ‘word’ (ῥῆμα) of God’ with which he fights the battle as if with a sword is not defined more closely (without an article) and in the context surely means nothing other than the Christian message, the Gospel (cf. Rom. 10:8; 1 Pet 1:25). The ‘Gospel of your salvation’ (1:13) held firmly in faith and held up to one’s enemies in truth, proves itself in battle through the power of the divine Spirit which is inherent in it.³⁰

Why doesn’t the Bible condemn bad rulers? (Eph 6:12)

The gospel is the history-making proclamation that God’s chosen leader is running the world.

I can’t imagine what it might be like to live through a civil war, where brothers tear each other apart for power. “Civil war” is a euphemism: there’s nothing civil about war.

That’s why Christians must be so careful how we play out the biggest conflict of all time, the battle for who runs the planet. We have a gospel that proclaims the restoration of God’s reign (Ephesians 1:3-14), with God’s anointed on the throne (1:15-23). For the people who’ve been oppressed under evil, that’s liberating news (2:1-10), the end of conflict, the establishment of global peace in God’s Christ (2:11-22).

But what about those who don’t recognize the reign of God’s anointed? What about those who claim to be in power? When Ephesians was written, this was Rome — the Empire that crucified Jesus, the power that imprisoned Paul (3:1, 6:20) and executed Peter. Did this make Caesar the enemy of Christ?

No, says Paul. Thinking of Caesar as the enemy of Christ is attributing him way too much power. He’s not the world ruler; that title belongs to Christ. Caesar is just a puppet, a marionette being played by darker powers. Think of him as a fellow human. Yes, he harms God’s people, but that’s because he’s enslaved in the service of evil:

Ephesians 6 ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (NIV)

³⁰ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: A Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 280.

That's why Paul spent zero effort fighting Rome: wrong enemy. It's why Jesus spent zero effort fighting Rome: the power he came to dislodge wasn't Rome, but the power behind Rome.

Remember, we discussed why the Bible doesn't condemn slavery. King Jesus has not called us to condemn the evils in his world, but to proclaim his kingship. As his kingship spreads, the evils disappear. Condemning systemic evils is flogging a dead horse.

Our judgementalism only bring the cause of Christ into disrepute. Conservatives and radicals, we all need to stop condemning and proclaim the good news:

- The gospel is not a social message that denounces evil rulers in this world.
- The gospel is not a personal message that denounces sinners to prepare them for another world.
- The gospel is the history-making proclamation that God's chosen leader (the Christ) is reigning over the world (our Lord).

We need to dismantle the benches we've erected to make ourselves judges. Let's build communities that embody what Jesus expects of his kingdom. His is the only power that changes the world.

What others are saying

Matthew Bates:

The gospel is a political statement with social implications.³¹

Excursus: Christ and the rulers of this world

How does seeking God's kingdom affect the way we relate to existing rulers?

Some of my conservative friends worry about me. They fear that seeking the kingdom will make me a "leftie," advocating for social change. They remind me Australia is a great place to live, with a Christian prime minister, who's doing a good job with the Covid-19 lockdown. Surely, we all need to pray for him and support him as God's man?

I've disappointed my radical friends too. I'm seeking the kingdom, but I'm not pushing for social change. They fear if we don't call out the systemic injustice, nothing will change. They remind me how inhumanely Scott Morrison treated people seeking asylum when he was immigration minister. Surely, we must disrupt the way things are if we are to have a better society, a kingdom of God?

It's interesting how deeply this left/right division runs in the church. It divides us over how we understand the gospel: what God is saving us from, and what God is saving us to.

Quick quiz. Which answer is the main way you think about...

- **Sin:** a) personal transgressions, or b) social injustices?

³¹ Matthew W. Bates, *Gospel Allegiance* (Baker, 2019), 33.

- **Salvation:** a) individual forgiveness, or b) global restoration?
- **Kingdom of God:** a) God's reign in hearts, or b) God's reign over the world?

If you answered (b) to these, do you vote left-wing? If you answered (a), do you vote right-wing? It's interesting how our current allegiances affect the way we understand the gospel:

1. Conservatives don't want disruptive change. For them, Jesus' kingdom is spiritual. He saves individuals from sins, so we can live with him in heaven for ever. But in this world, God has appointed rulers to keep law and order. Christians therefore belong to **two kingdoms**: a natural one with its government on earth, and a spiritual one with Jesus reigning in heaven.
2. Radicals want things to change. For them, Jesus' kingship reforms this world too. God gave the kingship to Jesus because this world was suffering under evil. It won't do to limit Jesus' kingship to the spiritual realm or a future era. **All authority** has been given to him, on earth as well as in heaven. We pray for his reign to come here, to this world, as it is in heaven.

Consequently, these two groups have very different views of what it means to live as a Christian:

1. The two-kingdoms view calls us to serve both: Jesus (the ruler God appointed for the spiritual kingdom), and our earthly government (the rulers God appointed for the physical realm).
2. The integrated view shines a light on present injustice, on how people with power in this world use their power to benefit themselves, to harm their enemies and to subjugate the marginalized. These systemic evils cannot be allowed to continue, for Christ is king.

Now the bombshell. The gospel supports neither view — neither the left, nor the right. Jesus has not called us to support nor condemn the current leaders, but to proclaim him as the alternative leader. The gospel is the history-making proclamation that God's chosen leader (the Christ) is reigning over the world (our Lord).

Scott Morrison is neither the messiah nor the devil. He's the man to whom God has given power in the short term, but he is not God's man to sort out all our problems. Even if he did want to do right, he's compromised by the power structures of his party, and he's quite good at playing the political game. The Bible consistently warns us that power corrupts even the best leaders like David and Solomon. But that doesn't make Scott our enemy; our enemy isn't the humans in power, but the evil that works through the humans in power (Ephesians 6:12).

Our king has not called us to support or undermine our rulers. He calls us to announce the good alternative, the news of his kingship. This is the consistent message of Ephesians:

1. In Christ, God has fulfilled his plan: redeeming the earth, installing his Christ, restoring our inheritance, raising up his king (Ephesians 1).
2. In Christ, God has ended the division between his nation and the other nations, raising up his failed nation and extending grace to the nations, ending the hostilities that divided humanity, proclaiming one new humanity in his anointed ruler (Ephesians 2).

3. In the assembly that gathers under his anointed, God is demonstrating to the rulers of this world and the spiritual powers they serve that people from every family now belong under one Father in the love of his anointed ruler (Ephesians 3).
4. So, it's crucial that we live as this reunified humanity under the leader who became king by descending into death to free the captives, appointing leaders to grow the new humanity in Christ, in contrast to the way the nations lived previously (Ephesians 4).
5. We now live as God's children, leaving dark deeds behind to live in the light of the One who raises humanity out of death to a new existence in him. We learn to live this self-giving lifestyle in the way we treat each other at home (Ephesians 5).
6. This self-giving Christ-life frames how we treat our children and operate our businesses. It also frames how we relate to leaders who don't yet recognize Christ as world ruler. Their power is dangerous, but they're not the enemy, so we trust the non-combatant armour God used to rescue his world (Ephesians 6).

Truth is, Jesus refuses to bow to our politics. He isn't a right-wing conservative who wants the world to stay as it is. He isn't a left-wing radical condemning the current rulers.

Jesus overturns the tables of the conservatives, for he is introducing a different kingdom.

Jesus joins no marches against the existing rulers: he came not to condemn them for their injustices, but to save them from the evil they serve.

Jesus' gospel is the history-making world-transforming proclamation that God's chosen leader (the Christ) is running the world (our Lord). This good news changes everything.

Staying in touch with our king (Eph 6:18-20)

Got each other's back?

Communication matters. Did you see Sam Mendes' movie, *1917*? Two soldiers were tasked with carrying a message across enemy lines, a message that could save the lives of many compatriots. Technology has come a long way in the last 100 years, but the movie reminds us how crucial communication is for saving lives.

Ephesians says we're not fighting the flesh-and-blood humans who think they're in power, but we are fighting the most important war in history: the conflict over who is running the world. For this battle, God has given us no other armour than what he used to save the world and defeat injustice, the armour Jesus wore as he stood before Pilate.

That's why it's so crucial to stay in touch with our Commander-in-Chief:

Ephesians 6:18–20 (NIV)

¹⁸ And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

The prayers of his soldiers are aligned with the goals of our king: his campaign to free the world from oppression under evil, to restore divine kingship to the planet so it is the kingdom of God. This goal conflicts with those who want power for their own benefits, such as Nero in Paul's time. That's why we pray for each other (6:18), and especially for the evangelists who announce the good news of a planet liberated in the kingship of God's anointed (6:19).

The writer understood this first-hand. As he wrote this, he was locked up by the rulers of this world (*in chains*) because he represented another kingdom (*as ambassador*). It can feel scary standing before someone who sees you as a threat to his power, someone like Nero or Pilate.

The armour of God was never about personal protection from evil spirits. It's about standing together as the army that announces Jesus as ruler of the planet, in the face of existing powers that serve evil to gain and keep their authority.

And prayer is the final piece of that protective armour. It's our communication channel with the king. With the promptings and guidance of the Spirit, this is how we have each other's back.

What others are saying

Frank Thielman:

To summarize, Paul urges his readers to defend their position in Christ against the onslaught of evil by prayer that is constant, Spirit-empowered, alert to surrounding evil, zealous in its devotion, and ecumenical in its breadth.³²

A courier for God's house (Eph 6:21-22)

A quick thought about what matters

With no Fed Ex or postal service in the first century, letters like the one we've been reading (Ephesians) were carried by hand. That's why we're introduced to Tychicus, the courier tasked with personally delivering this letter.

Ephesians 6 ²¹Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. ²²I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you. (NIV)

Tychicus was from Asia Minor (the area around Ephesus). He travelled to Rome with Paul to support his legal case before Caesar (Acts 20:4). If Paul wrote these "prison epistles" during his two-year incarceration in Rome, it would have taken months for Tychicus to carry them the 2,000 kilometres from Rome to the little gospel communities in Ephesus and Colossae (compare Colossians 4:7).

³² Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, BECNT (Baker Academic, 2010), 434.

We can only wonder what struggles Tychicus faced on that journey. Did he have companions to ensure he made it, to help keep him safe along the way? What were their names? God knows.

These people were not important enough to be recorded in the annals of Rome. But that empire fell apart a few centuries later, while the leadership of God's anointed is still spreading across the earth today. Earth's true ruler saw their significance, and recorded Tychicus as *a dear brother and faithful servant* (6:21), an *encourager* of the fledgling kingdom of God (6:22).

King Jesus knows and acknowledges each one who serves him. His accolades outweigh the glory of human recognition. I'd rather be a message-bearer for the kingdom of God than have all the fame in the world.

Peace and grace: the greeting that can deliver (Eph 6:23-24)

More than a wish; this good news heals the world.

Ephesians closes with two brief blessings that pull together the main themes of the letter. *Peace* and *grace* were common greetings in both the Jewish and Asian communities, but these words are much more than well-wishes. The good news in this letter is the divine grace that brings peace to the world.

Ephesians 6 ²³ **Peace** to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ **Grace** to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love. (NIV)

Peace in this letter means ending hostilities on earth (2:14-17). Peace for humanity arrived in the divinely appointed person who *is our peace* (2:14). He deserves that title because he dismantled the distinction between those who were God's people and those who were not, creating one new humanity in himself (2:15), reunifying us all in his kingship by proclaiming his *declaration of peace* for the people who were close to God and for the people who were not (2:17), combining us all as fellow citizens of God's reign (2:19). The community that embodies his kingship makes every effort to maintain this *bond of peace* in the power of the Spirit (4:3). This community takes the *good news of peace* into every municipality it enters (6:15).

This *peace* makes us *brothers and sisters* (6:23) because we are a single family in the Messiah. His Father is our Father. He's now *the Father from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name* (3:15).

Being adopted (1:5) into this family is receiving God's *love with faith*. Our eternal sovereign expressed his faithful love for the people of earth by giving us the ruler he appointed for humanity, *the Lord, Jesus Christ*. God *calls* us into his kingship (1:18; 4:1)—calling us out of the darkness of our death, into the brilliance of the Messiah's reign (4:14). That's how we participate in the *love with faith* that comes from our heavenly sovereign and his appointed ruler over earth (*God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*).

Grace is a wish for well-being, but it's so much more when it describes the overflow of divine benevolence to his earthly realm in the gift of his Son. *Jesus Christ our Lord* is repeated again in verse 24 not merely to pile up phrases but to underscore that God's generosity (grace) towards us is a person: *Jesus*, God's anointed ruler (*Christ*), ruler of all humanity (*our Lord*). That is the gospel, the good news of peace, our heavenly sovereign appointment of a new leader to bring us all together under his reign, as a kingdom of God.

The final word of this letter is *aphtharsia*, meaning something like incorruptibly, not subject to decay (BDAG). Bible students puzzle over what it refers to: our undying love towards Christ, his undying grace towards us, or something future (TDNT). Whichever way you cut it, the heart of what never decays is Christ's kingship. That's the inheritance God has given us, the fulfilment of God's plans for the world, the enduring hope of the letter's opening (1:1-14). Christ can deliver peace and grace to the world, because his authority rests on the divine decree that always endures. It never decays. It's *aphtharsia*.

The two closing verses, then, sum up the gospel declaration of this letter. Now we can appreciate the depth of meaning we didn't quite grasp when we began the letter:

Ephesians 1 ² **Grace** and **peace** to you from **God our Father** and the **Lord Jesus Christ**.

What others are saying

John Barclay:

The starting point [for "grace" in Paul's letters] is the framing of the *Christ-event as gift*. Christ's death "for our sins" (e.g., 1 Cor 15:3-4) is interpreted by Paul in the language of gift (God's gift of his Son, or Christ's gift of himself). The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are thus, for Paul, the focal point of divine beneficence: the witness of Scripture and the history and identity of Israel are interpreted in this light. Grace is discovered in an *event*, not in the general benevolence of God, and its focal expression lies not in creation nor in any other divine gift, but in the gift of Christ, which constitutes for Paul *the Gift*.³³

³³ John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Eerdmans, 2015), 566 (emphasis original).

Appendices

This appendix addresses five key questions about the kingdom of God:

1. What is the kingdom?
2. Who is *the king*?
3. What is the *gospel* of the kingdom?
4. How does the kingdom *come*?
5. What is *our role* in his kingdom?

Each one concludes with a one-sentence answer.

What is the kingdom?

You're not alone if you struggle with this question. Nick Perrin released an entire course on *A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God*. After 50+ videos, you reach his conclusion:

What is the kingdom? Well, in some ways, what I've been trying to suggest is the kingdom is terribly hard to describe, and I think Jesus wants it that way.³⁴

Sorry Nick, that's wrong. The kingdom was so obvious to Jesus and his hearers, that it didn't need defining. It wasn't foreign to them, but it is to us:

- a) We live in a democracy, not a kingdom. (We like the power to hire and fire our rulers.)
- b) We don't conceive of God as king. (For us, religion and politics separate categories.)

But *kingdom* is such a simple concept. Scot McKnight says:

It always involves a people ruled by a king.³⁵

A *kingdom* is two entities in relationship:

- a king,
- the community under his reign.

In the kingdom of God:

- God is king,
- all the people and creatures on earth live as the community under his governance.

This is what God always intended. We were designed as images of the heavenly king, exercising his dominion in his earthly realm, by caring for the earth and all its creatures.

³⁴ Nicholas Perrin, *BI301 A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God*, Logos Mobile Education (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

³⁵ Scot McKnight, *On the term "Kingdom"* 2014.

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2014/12/21/on-the-term-kingdom/>

The next article develops this further, but here's a basic **definition**:

The kingdom of God is: earth as the community under divine governance.

Who is the king?

Here's a single question to clarify Jesus' teaching on the kingdom: **Who is the king?**

That question has two answers:

- a) God is king. It's the kingdom *of God*.
- b) Christ is king. God entrusted his kingship on earth to his anointed (*Christ*).

Our heavenly sovereign doesn't impose his rule on us; he exercises his reign through us. He designed us to be images of his dominion, for the benefit of all the creatures on earth (Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8).

That's why God promised to restore his reign through humans, through Abraham's family. When Israel asked for a king, God agreed to have a son of David representing his reign on earth (2 Samuel 7:11-16). God's reign is through "the LORD and his anointed" (Psalm 2:2).

So Jesus is God's Anointed (the Christ). But Jesus rarely promoted himself. If we don't realize that he's talking about his own kingship, his kingdom teaching can sound cryptic.

The problem is that when he does speak about himself, Jesus is accused of self-promotion:

John 8 ¹² He said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

¹³ The Pharisees challenged him, "Here you are, appearing as your own witness; your testimony is not valid." (NIV)

That's why Jesus rarely makes the kingship claim. Instead, he **demonstrates** he is God's anointed by setting things right, and he expects people to make the connection for themselves:

Matthew 12 ²² Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see.

²³ All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the **Son of David?**" (NIV)

The Gospel writers expect us to recognize Jesus' regal **authority**. They constantly promote his *authority*.³⁶

When you realize it's about who is king, Jesus' teaching and kingdom activity comes into sharp focus. The kingdom is there if the king is there:

Luke 17 ²⁰ On being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, ²¹ nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is **in your midst**." (NIV)

³⁶ See Matthew 7:29; 8:9; 9:6-8; 10:1; 20:25; 21:23-27; 28:18; Mark 1:22, 27; 2:10; 3:15; 6:7; 10:42; 11:28-33; Luke 4:6, 32, 36; 5:24; 7:8; 9:1; 10:19; 12:5, 11; 20:2-8, 20; 22:25; John 2:18; 5:27; 7:26-28; 10:18; 14:20; 17:2

The **kingdom** is in their midst because the **king** is in their midst. Jesus is (as Origen called him) the *autobasileia*—the kingdom in himself.

The *son of man* is the human who restores God's reign. *The Christ* is God's anointed ruler. *Our Lord* is the ruler to whom we give allegiance.

We can now refine our **definition**:

The kingdom of God is: earth as the community under divine governance, through Christ Jesus our Lord (King Jesus our ruler).

What is the gospel of the kingdom?

Jesus' gospel was different to ours. Here's how the Gospels summarize his message and mission:

Matthew 9 ³⁵ Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming **the good news of the kingdom** and healing every disease and sickness.

Luke 4 ⁴³ He said, "I must proclaim **the good news of the kingdom of God** to the other towns also, because **that is why I was sent.**"

What is the gospel of the kingdom? How is it different to a gospel of personal forgiveness? Jesus' gospel is on a different scale—the difference between liberating a prisoner and liberating a planet.

The gospel can't be reduced to a pardon for a guilty individual. Jesus announced a cosmic gospel: the emancipation of a world dominated by sin and death, the recreation of everything damaged during the reign of evil. His goal was not individual conscience relief; his goal was freeing humanity from oppression under evil, to be the agents of God's governance, the community embodying God's reign in how we treat each other and his world.

Many people don't believe Jesus' gospel. The scope and power of evil feels overwhelming. War, conquest, famine, and death are the tools of tyrants we experience at every level, from family to corporation to country. History is clear: those who stand against tyranny are silenced or slaughtered. Jesus knew. He knew that confronting the sin of the world would cost him his life, that the rulers would put him to death. He knew the world could only be released from those who deal death by an act of God—the one who deals life.

How God fulfilled this good news is the topic of our next article.

For now, we offer this definition:

The gospel of the kingdom is: the good news of God's kingship restored over the earth.

What others are saying

John Dickson:

At the heart of the gospel message (in the Old and New Testaments) is the idea of God's rule as king, in other words, his kingdom. When the first Christians proclaimed this gospel of the kingdom, they were not copying the "gospel" of the Roman kingdom; they were exposing it as a fraud. It was God,

not any human king, who ruled over all. This is the central theme of the Christian gospel.³⁷

Scot McKnight:

When Augustus seized power, he was deemed a savior because he ended bitter civil wars and created the peace of Rome (*pax Romana*). The gospel of Rome was that Augustus, a “son of [a] god,” saved Rome by bringing peace to the world. ... Luke tells his readers that Jesus is the real Son of God, the Savior, who brings Good News of peace to the world.³⁸

David Seccombe:

A gospel at the time of the birth of the New Testament was the announcement of momentous good news, mostly about victory in battle and the rise and fall of kingdoms.³⁹

How does the kingdom come?

Everyone in Jesus’ world knew what the *kingdom of God* was. It was the story they were living in. It started with Eden. Its restoration was promised to Abraham. It became a thing under Moses. Earthly kings like David represented God’s kingship. But it fell apart when Assyria and Babylon destroyed Israel as a nation.

So how would it be restored? They all knew what it was, but there were differing views on of how the kingdom of God would be restored.

John the Baptist expected God’s appointed ruler to come in judgement, cutting down the evil leaders of God’s people, casting them into the fire, and empowering the true people of God with his Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:7-12). When Jesus did not attack their evil rulers and set the prisoners free, John became unsure that Jesus would save them (11:2-3).

Jesus’ disciples expected him to ride into Jerusalem to the adulation of the crowds who would cease following the temple rulers and follow God’s anointed instead. They recognized him as the Christ, the Son of the heavenly Sovereign (Matthew 16:16-22), and they expected others would too. When this didn’t happen, their hopes were dashed (Luke 24:21).

Pharisees expected that God would restore his kingship over Israel when the people had demonstrated their willingness to live under the Sinai covenant—the covenant that established God as their king (Deuteronomy 30:2-3). Their hope was expressed in a document called *Psalms of Solomon* (written in the first century BC):

Psalms of Solomon 18:5-8

⁵ May God cleanse Israel for the day of mercy in blessing,
for the appointed day **when his Messiah will reign.**

³⁷ John Dickson, *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission: Promoting the Gospel with More Than Our Lips* (HarperCollins, 2010), 114

³⁸ Scot McKnight, “The Mary We Never Knew: Why the Mother of Jesus Was More Revolutionary than We’ve Been Led to Believe,” *Christianity Today* 50:12 (2006), 29–30.

³⁹ David Seccombe, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Jesus’ Revolutionary Message*, Electronic Edition. (Whitefield Publications, 2016).

⁶ Blessed are those born in those days,
to see the good things of the Lord
which he will do for the coming generation;
⁷ under the rod of discipline of **the Lord Messiah**,
in the fear of his God, in wisdom of spirit,
and of righteousness and of strength,
⁸ **to direct people in righteous acts**, in the fear of God,
to set them all in the fear of the Lord.⁴⁰

Jesus took a completely different approach to any of these. Like others, Jesus believed the world was operating under the wrong rulers (not functioning as the kingdom of God), but he had a completely different strategy for addressing that problem.

- a) He refused to attack the current rulers to free God's people. He refused the violent path trodden by previous leaders (Abraham, Moses, Joshua, the judges, David and the kings, the Maccabees, Aristobulus, ...)
- b) He blamed the problem on the Jewish leaders, not their gentile oppressors. Israel had failed to be a light to the nations, the people through whom God's restorative reign should come to the world.
- c) He knew this would cost him his life. Israel's rulers—under the power of evil—would never give up their claims to power. To keep their power, they had to get rid of God's anointed.

Consequently:

- a) Jesus avoided any confrontation with Herod (avoiding Herod's towns).
- b) Jesus confronted the Jewish rulers (overturning the temple).
- c) Jesus expected the rulers to kill him. He believed God would raise him up anyway, so this would be how God would restore his reign over the earth (Matthew 16:21).

Jesus' approach aligns with Daniel 7:13-14, the expectation that the kingdom of God would be restored not by attacking the beasts who currently run the world but through Israel's ancient ruler acting to take the kingdom from the beasts, giving it to one like *a son of man*.

So how would the kingdom be restored on earth? Through an act of God. God would take the kingdom from the beasts and give it to the Son of Man. Not by dealing death (war), but by dealing life (resurrection), God would give the kingdom to his faithful Son, the one who remained faithful to the Ancient of Days, even unto death. In this way, God's anointed liberates earth from evil and death, into God's reign.

In a single sentence:

God's kingdom is restored to earth by raising his anointed from the dead,
giving him all authority in heaven and on earth.

⁴⁰ James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testaments*, vol. 2 (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1985), 669.

What others are saying

Gushee and Stassen:

“The focus of the new obedience is found in the twin commandment to love” (cf. Mt 22:34–40; Chilton and McDonald, *Jesus and the Ethics*, 53, 73, 86–87, 91–92). The kingdom is something we do, not just wait for. We “enter the kingdom” as we do **kingdom praxis** such as justice, peacemaking, healing, community building, and deliverance. Jesus did such praxis, and we must do the same. We are a part of the breaking in of the kingdom of God, if we are willing. The kingdom is a “place we go” only by doing its practices. This vision of a kingdom we don’t just wait for, but practice now, has consistently proven dynamically motivating for many Christians who are weary of an otherworldly or overspiritualized presentation of the Christian message.⁴¹

What is our role in his kingdom?

Kingdom work is a catchphrase for everything from social justice to church fund raising. But does it mean to work for the kingdom?

At the simplest level, *kingdom work* is doing what the king wants done.

We just need to be clear about what the king wants us to do. Is it individual piety, or getting people saved? Is it doing church work, or exposing injustice in society? Or is there no such thing as kingdom work, because the kingdom comes from God’s work, not ours? You’ll find people advocating all those positions.

How do we find out what the king wants done? The New Testament could provide some insight:

- In the **Gospels**, God’s anointed ruler sent his followers to do two things:
 - a) announce his kingship, and
 - b) enact his kingship, by healing people who were struggling (Luke 9:1-2; 10:1, 9).
- **Acts** begins with Jesus’ followers:
 - a) announcing Jesus as Lord (2:36), and
 - b) establishing a community that represents his reign (2:36-44).
 These are the two things they do across the known world.
- Many **Epistles** have the same macro-structure:
 - a) explaining the good news of God’s anointed who is now ruling (Christ Jesus is Lord), and
 - b) calling us to live as the community enacting life under his kingship.

Only rarely do the Epistles ask believers to talk about Jesus. The emphasis is almost entirely on being implementing communal life under our king.

For example, Ephesians 1–3 explains the gospel of the king, followed by the “so what?”

⁴¹ David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 13.

Ephesians 4 ¹ I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.
² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. (NIV)

The rest of Ephesians calls us to live as the community under his kingship:

- becoming a reunified humanity under the resurrected King (4:1-16)
- developing the lifestyle of people who are being renewed (4:17 – 5:20)
- living for each other at home and at work, just as our king gave himself for us (5:21 – 6:9)
- serving our king in the face of oppressive powers, with nothing to keep us safe but the armour God wore when he confronted evil (6:10-23).

For us, kingdom life is primarily about being kingdom people, living as the community that embodies the life of our king on earth. Living as his community gives us the credibility to talk about our unique king, the one whose character is like no other ruler, and the story of how he became king.

Kingdom work isn't primarily about individual piety, getting people saved, doing church work, exposing injustice in society, or sitting around waiting for Jesus to return.

More than what we do, kingdom work turns out to be more about who we are in our king:

Kingdom work is: implementing communal life under the king.

Alternative views: our role in his kingdom

We defined *kingdom work* as “implementing communal life under the king.” We should also consider other views of what kingdom work could be.

Since we have limited time and resources, the king's tasks are our priority. We don't want to be tangled in tasks that are tangents.

So, let's evaluate some common proposals. (Skip down to Proposal 5 if you wish.)

Proposal 1: Only the church can do kingdom work.

There's a stream of thought that identifies the church with the kingdom. It's not only Catholics who do this. Scot McKnight believes that only those who recognize Jesus as king can do kingdom work:

There is no kingdom now outside the church.⁴²

That's not how Jesus sees it. In his role as king, Jesus acknowledges people who haven't recognized him, and yet do what he wants:

Matthew 25 ⁴⁰ The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' (NIV)

The classic example would be the Persian king Cyrus who ordered the return from exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. He didn't know the LORD, but he did kingdom work:

⁴² Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014), 87.

Isaiah 44 ²⁸ [The LORD] says of Cyrus, ‘He is **my shepherd** and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, “Let it be rebuilt,” and of the temple, “Let its foundations be laid.” ’ (NIV)

Human rulers are generally under the control of evil, but they can do work for God’s kingdom (like the Pharaoh who listened to Joseph and saved many lives). When we find people who want to do what the king wants, commend and encourage them. It might even help them discover their king.

Proposal 2: Kingdom work means protesting systemic injustice

If the kingdom isn’t just the church, if it’s the wider community, do we have the responsibility to expose the evil that’s endemic to the power systems of the world?

Walter Wink says yes. He calls us to activism, to name evil for what it is, to unmask its insidious nature, to engage it through non-violent confrontation. A choir of other of voices also call us to non-violent resistance: John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, Shane Claiborne, Jarrod McKenna, and so on.

Should we raise our voices against injustice in our community like the Old Testament prophets did? Does kingdom work mean *speaking truth to power*?

Israel’s kings were leaders who were supposed to be representing the reign of YHWH on earth. The prophets confronted them for misrepresenting God (e.g. Ezekiel 34). That is not an appropriate model for the world we live in.

This is not how Jesus understood kingdom work. He never confronted their political leaders (Herod or Pilate). He did confront the religious leaders for failing to represent God. It may be appropriate to confront church leaders for misrepresenting God, but we’re wasting our time and resources trying to fix the current political system.

We are not called to protest the current system. We’re called to replace it—to be the alternative, the community that lives out what King Jesus wants for his world.

Proposal 3: Kingdom work is individual conversion

This line of thinking says you can only enter the kingdom by being born again (John 3:3, 5), so kingdom work means confronting individuals with their need for salvation and getting them to make a decision. In this view, the kingdom means putting Christ on the throne of my heart.

But this individual approach is foreign to Jesus’ kingdom vision. If there is one thing that cannot be a kingdom, it’s an individual. A kingdom is a community, under a king.

In fact, the language of personal decision is dangerous, because it puts the power with me. It’s not my decision; God has already made the decision that Jesus is king. Instead of asking someone to put Jesus on the throne of her heart, we’re called to announce that God has given him the throne over us all.

Jesus called people to publicly acknowledge him as the king appointed to implement heaven’s kingship on earth:

What Jesus did was to call people to acknowledge him as the king who represents God's kingship on earth:

Matthew 10 ³² Whoever **acknowledges** me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. ³³ But whoever **disowns** me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven. (NIV)

This is no private decision: in publicly identifying him as king, we committed to life as the community under his kingship (his kingdom).

Proposal 4: The kingdom of God is the future reign of Christ

Dispensationalists view the kingdom of God as a future 1,000-year reign (the millennium of Revelation 20:1-7). They understand Jesus' parables and kingdom teaching as all about this future era. It's something God will do in his time, so there's nothing we can do towards it. The term *kingdom work* is therefore a misnomer, an oxymoron.

We can agree that the kingdom of God is fully implemented only with Jesus' return, when every knee bows to him, and every tongue gives him allegiance. But even many dispensationalists now recognize that the kingdom is already present, even though it is not fully here yet—already, but not yet.

And if Jesus is already reigning, there are things we can do as the implementation of his reign. We can (and must) be engaged in kingdom work.

Proposal 5: Kingdom work is implementing communal life under the king

A kingdom is a community under a king. The kingdom of God is the community that lives under God's anointed ruler (Christ, our Lord). So, *kingdom work* means *doing what the king wants done*.

We don't exist to condemn the current rulers (proposal 2) or individual sinners (proposal 3). We're not sitting around with nothing to do till the millennium (proposal 4). And we're not the only ones doing it (proposal 1).

The kingdom is not about individual piety. It's about being the community that cares for each other and all the creatures under his governance—what Michael Gorman calls *missional theosis*.⁴³

We are our message. The kingdom is the community that embodies the justice and hospitality of our king. How else will they trust his leadership?

Kingdom work is implementing communal life under the king.

⁴³ Michael J. Gorman, *Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John*. Cascade Books, 2018.

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