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On the Wicket Way: Kingdom Leadership in a Secular World

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Arguably, one of the most important works in the English language is John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress: From This World to That Which Is to Come*. Originally written from prison in the late 17th century, *The Pilgrim's Progress* has never been out of print.¹ Composed as an allegorical dream narrative, Bunyan describes the epic journey of every Christian (Bunyan's central character is allegorically named "Christian"). Christian faces distractions, challenges, and perils along the way but, with helpful guides, stays on the narrow path to the distant Celestial City.

As he makes the journey from "here" to "there," from "The City of Destruction" to "The Celestial City," Christian must pass through "The Wicket-Gate" and walk "The Wicket Way" (my phrase, not Bunyan's), the straight, narrow, arduous path that alone leads to his ultimate destination, his true home. On "The Wicket Way," he passes through other places, prospective "homes," that entice him to settle down and stay – The Slough of Despond, The Village of Morality, The Palace Beautiful, The Delectable Mountains, Vanity Fair – but none of them Christian's true home. He is warned along The Wicket Way not to lie down and sleep, for that would prove fatal. The Celestial City is his true home, and he must never get comfortable and settle down until he arrives at his final destination. Christian, however, does not make the journey alone; he travels in, and benefits from, the company of guides who help him stay on the path – "Faithful" and "Hopeful." Though these guides have never actually been to The Celestial City, they have caught sight of it, and it will not let them go until they reach, with fellow-pilgrims in tow, what they have come to believe is their true home. The two central ideas of

¹ *The Pilgrim's Progress* has now been digitized by *Project Gutenberg* and available to readers online at <https://www.gutenberg.org>.

Bunyan's story should not escape us: (1) that this world is not our home; (2) we can, nonetheless, glimpse our true home from here, which fact compels and propels "Christian" on pilgrimage to his true home.²

Part of the reason Bunyan's masterpiece has survived the test of time is that it is an apt description of the Christian's life, of the dialectical character of the Christian's relationship with this world, and of the nature of Christian leadership as "guides" who lead Christian on "The Wicket Way." There is all the difference in the world as to whether one sees Christian leadership as helping God's people to be comfortable and to settle down in *this world*, or as guiding God's people to *another world*, a world that can be glimpsed from this world, but is not this world.

When I was a boy, we used to sing an old Gospel song in church, *This World is Not My Home; I'm Just a'Passin' Through*. I have never heard that sung in modern churches, not so much because of its music as its message. It is too escapist, it seems, too esoteric, too "otherworldly" to be serviceable in today's church where the focus often seems to be more on how to thrive in *this* world rather than living as though you belong to another.

And yet, when you turn to the Gospels, Bunyan's theme is central. The Jesus of the Gospels has very little interest in helping people adapt to this world; rather, Jesus comes to call

² See Philip H. Pfatteicher, "Walking home together: John Bunyan and the Pilgrim Church," *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2016, 90ff., who writes: "We are to learn, as the Bible teaches, that this world is *not* our home and we must not get too comfortable in it. We, like our spiritual ancestors the ancient Hebrews, are on a prolonged journey, through difficult days and years on our way to a place which we have never seen but which we know is our home, our true native land. Here we are "strangers and pilgrims seeking a homeland" the book of Hebrews says (Heb 11:13-14), resident aliens in a land where we are but temporarily settled. This heavenly-mindedness does not mean that we are to ignore the world in which we live, for Jeremiah the prophet speaks to us as well as to the Hebrews in their long exile in Babylon: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer. 29:7). We are not just to build our lives here; we are in fact to seek and indeed work for the well-being of the world in which we live. But we must also remember that there is a larger picture, and that our true home is elsewhere. There is or there ought to be in each of the baptized a profound homesickness, for by that sacrament of initiation we have been made citizens of heaven. We are charged with seeking the welfare of the land in which we live, but that does not mean that we are to conform to all its customs. We, like Christian reading his book, are not supposed to fit in. The ways of the world are not to become our ways."

persons to, and to prepare persons for, the next, a world he called “the kingdom of God,” a world so counter-cultural to the vision and values of this world that its citizens can never feel “at home” here.³

To be sure, this concept of the kingdom of God as a counter-cultural, alternative reality, both in the world but not of it, is challenging for some to grasp.⁴ Perhaps an illustration will help. Imagine for a moment that the room in which you are reading this is the only room in the whole world, and the people with whom you occupy this room the only people in the world. There are no windows or doors in your room; hence, you have no concept of anything outside your little “world.” Indeed, the word “outside” does not exist in your language. You would be forgiven in such a situation for believing that your room and the people with whom you occupy it were the

³ “Modern scholarship is quite unanimous in the opinion that the kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus,” George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), p. 54. For the definitive summary of both Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom of God and the scholarly literature on the subject, see George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), *passim*. Indeed, in a real sense, the study of *any* subject in the Synoptic Gospels will have to take into account Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God as *the* narrative context for such a study. That is because the key idea at the core of the first-century Jewish worldview (of which the New Testament was a product) was a fundamental eschatological dualism referred to as the doctrine of the Two Ages: the belief that the world as it is (the “Present Evil Age”) is given over to the dominion of Satan who has usurped God’s rightful sovereignty over God’s creation, but that the “Age to Come,” which is just over the horizon, *is the world of the kingdom of God* in which God’s legitimate sovereignty (i.e., God’s “kingdom”) will be finally and fully reestablished over all the world bringing with it redemption, peace, and justice. The phrase “kingdom of God,” then, is the “Synoptic shorthand” for this belief. When the Synoptic Gospels say “kingdom of God,” this is what they mean (see Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*). Moreover, it is not merely so for the Synoptic Gospels. One can make the case that this essential eschatological dualism of the “Present Evil Age” and the “Age to Come” is *the* hermeneutical matrix for the entire New Testament. In the Gospel of John, for example, the “Age to Come” or the “kingdom of God” is translated into the phrase “life of the Age,” or as it is frequently mistranslated, “eternal life” (Greek, *zoe aionion*). Paul believed in the doctrine of the Two Ages: “[Jesus] who gave himself for our sins so that he might deliver us from this present evil age” (Gal 1:4). It is also the heuristic backstory of the General Epistles, as illustrated in 1 Peter 5:10 and 2 Peter 1:11, although the doctrine of the Two Ages is typically obscured by the translations that insist on translating the Greek word “age” (*aionion*) by the English word “eternal,” thus severing it from its etymological, historical, and hermeneutical context. And, of course, the dualism of the Two Ages is everywhere assumed as the interpretive framework for the Apocalypse. See G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 42ff., who comments: “Whatever be the origin of the specific idiom [the Two Ages], the idea expressed by it goes back to the Old Testament contrast between the present world and the future redeemed order. It provides the framework for Jesus’ entire message and ministry as reported by the Synoptic Gospels,” p. 43.

⁴ For a fuller treatment of this theme, see Robert Wayne Stacy, “Following Jesus in the Kingdom of God: Leadership in the Synoptic Gospels,” in *Biblical Leadership: Theology for the Everyday Leader*, ed. By Benjamin K. Forrest and Chet Roden (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2017), pp. 316-333.

entire universe. However, completely unknown to you, there exists another floor above your room where other people are living other lives and doing other things. You are not aware of their existence because you have never been outside your own little “world,” but they are there, nonetheless. Now, suppose a hole was torn in the ceiling of your “world” (the floor of the “world” above) so that for the first time you were aware of this “other world” just above you. And suppose some in your “world” began to call up to the people in the room above, interacting with them, learning about all sorts of strange and wondrous things, things utterly inconceivable in your “world.” Indeed, you discover to your amazement that the people in the room above live their lives according to entirely different “rules” than those which govern life in your “world.” In the room above, the poor are not regarded as a drain on the system, but are precious and prized; the old and the sick are honored and valued rather than warehoused and discarded; in this “world,” if one makes a promise, one keeps it, even when inconvenient or difficult; and in this “world,” it is okay to suffer for doing the right thing. Some in the “world” below find themselves strangely drawn toward this “world” above and its customs and culture. Indeed, a few are so captured by this new “world” and its new way of living, that even though they still live in the “world” below, they start to think of themselves as really belonging to the “world” above. Though they are still in your “world,” they are no longer of your “world,” the knowledge of the room above having broken through into their “world,” changing them forever.⁵ This is what Jesus meant when he proclaimed, according to the Synoptic Gospels, that the kingdom of God had broken in and broken through in his life and ministry.⁶ He was describing an eschatological

⁵ This illustration was previously published in R. Wayne Stacy, “Introduction to the Thessalonian Correspondences,” *Review & Expositor* vol. 96, No 2 (Spring 1999), 175-194.

⁶ Indeed, Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom of God as *the* narrative context of the Synoptic Gospels. That is because the key idea at the core of the first-century Jewish worldview (of which the New Testament was a product) was a fundamental eschatological dualism referred to as the doctrine of the Two Ages: the belief that the world as it is (the “Present Evil Age”) is given over to the dominion of Satan who has usurped God’s rightful sovereignty over God’s creation, but that the “Age to Come,” which is just over the horizon, *is the world of the*

event, indeed, a world-defining event, so radical and revolutionary that it created a whole new community which he called the “church” (*qahal* in Hebrew, *ekklesia* in Greek), of people who, having caught sight of it, could never go back to what they once were.⁷

While the eschatological nature of the kingdom of God as a wholly new world breaking through amid this present, broken, and evil world has many implications, perhaps the most

kingdom of God in which God’s legitimate sovereignty (i.e., God’s “kingdom”) will be finally and fully reestablished over all the world bringing with it redemption, peace, and justice. The phrase “kingdom of God,” then, is the “Synoptic shorthand” for this belief. When the Synoptic Gospels say “kingdom of God,” this is what they mean (see Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*). Moreover, it is not merely so for the Synoptic Gospels. One can make the case that this essential eschatological dualism of the “Present Evil Age” and the “Age to Come” is *the* hermeneutical matrix for the entire New Testament. In the Gospel of John, for example, the “Age to Come” or the “kingdom of God” is translated into the phrase “life of the Age,” or as it is frequently mistranslated, “eternal life” (Greek, *zoe aionion*). Paul clearly believed in the doctrine of the Two Ages: “[Jesus] who gave himself for our sins so that he might deliver us from this present evil age” (Gal 1:4). It is also the heuristic backstory of the General Epistles, as illustrated in 1 Peter 5:10 and 2 Peter 1:11, although the doctrine of the Two Ages is typically obscured by the translations that insist on translating the Greek word “age” (*aionion*) by the English word “eternal,” thus severing it from its etymological, historical, and hermeneutical context. And, of course, the dualism of the Two Ages is everywhere assumed as the interpretive framework for the Apocalypse. See G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 42ff., who comments: “Whatever be the origin of the specific idiom [the Two Ages], the idea expressed by it goes back to the Old Testament contrast between the present world and the future redeemed order. It provides the framework for Jesus’ entire message and ministry as reported by the Synoptic Gospels,” p. 43.

⁷ In the New Testament, eschatology has two meanings: (1) the end of the world; (2) the “breakthrough” of eternity into the present reality. While the term literally means “study of last things,” NT scholars use the term to refer to the consistent emphasis in the NT on the fact that the telos (End) broke in and broke through in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. With the events surrounding the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus (beginning with John’s proclamation), the telos and the advent of God’s kingdom decisively, if not fully, broke into our world effectively ending the world “as we know it.” (For a fuller treatment of this theme and its central significance in the New Testament, see, for example, G. E. Ladd’s *A Theology of the New Testament*, *passim*.) For example, there is an essentially eschatological character to the preaching of John the Baptist as portrayed in the NT. John, like many eschatologically-oriented Jews of the first-century world, believed in the concept of “The Two Ages,” the present evil age (which is given over to the dominion of Satan and his kingdom), and the Age of the kingdom of God, when God will overthrow Satan from his usurpation of God’s throne and once again establish God’s unchallenged sovereignty over the world and everyone in it. Jews like John believed that they lived on the cusp of the New Age of the kingdom and that as a prelude to this imminent breakthrough of God’s sovereignty (referred to in the Old Testament prophets as the “Day of the LORD”) God’s people needed to get ready, to prepare to meet God and his kingdom. This they would do by repenting of their infidelity to God and their idolatry to this world and by recommitting themselves to be God’s very own people. A sign of this repentance was baptism, a symbol of washing away the old life so that one could be prepared to live a new life in the New World of the kingdom. John is out in the desert preaching this imminently coming kingdom and warning people to “get ready” for it (see, for example, this essentially eschatological character of John’s preaching as witnessed in Luke 3:7-20. Hence, John isn’t just preaching a message of warning about the “evils of this world;” rather, he is assuming the prophetic mantle of the great OT prophets before him (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, etc.) and warning God’s people that the Day of the LORD is near and that they had better get ready! And so, it is important to keep in mind that the NT speaks of eschatology in two senses: (1) the end (Greek telos) of all things, associated in Christian circles with the return (or *Parousia* of Jesus) and; (2) the incipient reality that the end has already broken through into the present moment. That eternity itself has been pulled like a blanket across what we know as reality and is, from time to time, spiking down through it, revealing itself in the here and now. This too is eschatology.

important has to do with the mission of the kingdom community Jesus called and created. Specifically, the kingdom community called church is not here to “fix” this world; rather, it is here to announce the end of this world (which is what “eschatological” means) and the advent of a whole new world only visible through the eyes of faith.⁸ Consequently, the church does not have a social agenda (as though the purpose of the church is merely to come up with a new and better strategy to address the ills of society); rather, it *is* a social agenda; namely, to invite others into the community so that they too might catch sight of the kingdom and be captured and claimed by it.⁹

If this, then, is the Gospel-derived identity of the church (*a community of persons captured by a vision of another world Jesus called the kingdom of God, and which is forming those persons, though yet remaining in this world, to be citizens of the kingdom rather than citizens of the world*), then this has important implications both for the character of the church and its leadership. For example, the church is to be the vanguard of the kingdom of God rather than the vanguard of the culture. To say it more specifically and pointedly: the church is a *counter-cultural* community of persons who have bought into a different story, embraced a different vision, and live a different set of values from that of the dominant culture; that is to say, *it is an enclave of one culture living in the midst of another*. Christians say: “I’m a Christian, therefore, I don’t believe in luck or coincidence; I believe in Providence;” “I’m a Christian; I don’t believe in a sovereign *sui generis* Nature; I believe in creation;” “I’m a Christian; I don’t believe in “oops” or “my bad” or behavioral dysfunction/pathology; I believe in sin;” “I’m a Christian; I don’t believe in human development or self-actualization; I believe in something

⁸ For a fuller treatment of this theme, see Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), *passim*; see esp. pp. 86ff.

⁹ *Resident Aliens*, pp. 43ff.

more profound, promising, and painful called salvation, and it is *God's* work, not ours;" "I'm a Christian; I don't believe in conflict resolution; I believe in confession and repentance and forgiveness, which is how Christians resolve conflict."

Now, I am not arguing that the church should be escapist or isolationist. The New Testament is clear: the church is to be *in* the world while not being *of* the world. Get these two out of balance and the church loses its way. When the church puts too much emphasis on the latter, the church runs the risk of "being so heavenly minded that it is no earthly good." The church of Jesus Christ has a stake in social, economic, racial, and gender justice. But Christians do not feed the hungry because they think that by doing so they can eliminate hunger in their lifetime. Rather, Christians feed the hungry *because they are Christians*, and that is what Christians do. On the other hand, when the church puts too much emphasis on the former, the church becomes merely another "social service organization" baptizing the world's ways of saving.

Concerning leadership in the church, this "kingdom" view of the church means that leadership is neither purely operational nor functional; it is visionary, corporate, and transformational.¹⁰ Leadership in the church is finally a matter of *vision* – someone has caught sight of another world that will not let them go. That is, leaders are *kingdom guides*, guiding the "Christian," in the community of Christians called "church," on "The Wicket Way."

The challenge of church leadership in a secular world, then, is threefold: (1) to cast a vision of that "other world" so compelling and clear that others are drawn to it; (2) to keep the

¹⁰ Most discussions of leadership today focus either on the ontology of leadership (analysis of the qualities, skills, or traits required of a leader) or the methodology of leadership (analysis of the program, agenda, or strategy involved in leadership), with little, if any, attention paid to the teleology (eschatology) of leadership (the goal or end toward which the leader leads). Yet, in the biblical perspective, leadership is almost entirely a matter of teleology (eschatology), with little, if any, interest in the ontology and methodology of leadership. See Michale Ayers, "Toward a Theology of Leadership," in *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership*, vol 1. no. 1 (Fall 2006), pp. 3-27.

community focused on that vision rather than being sidetracked down peripheral paths – to keep “the main thing” the main thing; (3) to be ever mindful that the leader is *guiding* the “Christian” on a way and to a place that he/she has caught sight of, but never actually arrived at themselves. This means that the leader must be a “big picture person.” While it is expected and even desirable for folk to feel that what they happen to be doing in church at a particular moment is the most important thing the church is doing (building Habitat homes, visiting shut-ins, music ministry, youth ministry, evangelism, small groups, food distribution, etc.), the leader cannot afford to succumb to the compositional fallacy of treating the part as the whole. Leaders must keep the big picture in view (we are a Gospel-formed community calling and forming persons to be citizens of the kingdom of God), else the church runs the risk of degenerating into a “special interest group” rather than the church. And leaders must be humble, always remembering that they are *fellow travelers* on “The Wicket Way,” not its gatekeepers.

As “Christian” and “Hopeful” journey on “The Wicket Way,” they come to a fork in the road in which both paths appear to lead home. They are approached by a man who is himself, he says, bound for The Celestial City, but he is not. “Follow me,” he says, “and I will show you the way.” But he leads them, not to their destination, but in a circular path where they become helplessly entangled in a great net. Rescued, they are scolded and reminded: “There is no such place as you dream in this world...but there is in the world to come.” And so, “Christian,” in the company of, and guided by, “Hopeful,” resumes his journey, confident in the knowledge that “The Wicket Way” alone will lead him faithfully, hopefully, unfailingly home.