

The Jesus Plan

Introduction

Imagine a scientific expedition setting out in Victorian times, exploring uncharted territory. The explorers follow the intended path, more or less, they record the strange animals they meet, draw the big ones and capture examples of the small ones. They return with a wealth of information and samples, proud of their achievement. Sadly, the whole thing was largely a failure, because it was a geological expedition, intended to collect rocks and soil samples. They didn't follow the plan.

Jesus had a plan. It is absolutely clear from the Gospel accounts – He had both a *mission* and a *method*: He knew what He was setting out to achieve, and He knew how He planned to achieve it. Or, perhaps, He was guided at each step along the way: it makes little difference.

For those who seek to follow Jesus, understanding this plan must surely be important. We need to understand the plan so that we can be a part of it – grasp the difference between those things which, here and now, support the plan, and those things which, here and now, oppose the plan, and live accordingly..

The plan can be expressed in many different ways, but here is one possibility.

- The *mission* is for the whole world to participate in the Kingdom of God.
- The *method* is for everyone to find spiritual life in Him, so that religion becomes unnecessary.

We can see this very clearly in the pages of the New Testament: Jesus and the early Church set about proclaiming and inaugurating the Kingdom of God. What they did not do was set up a new religion.

Of course, we know that the Jesus movement soon turned into a religion: many Christians fervently believe it to be the best religion, perhaps the 'one true' religion. Many of us are very comfortable functioning within this religion. But, however comfortable we are, we may wonder if Jesus and His early followers got it right after all: perhaps the job of a follower of Jesus is not to take what He gave and improve upon it; perhaps our job is simply to follow in the path He laid out.

Background

Jesus was a Jew: this is a vitally important part of who He was. But He had a very nuanced approach to the religion He grew up in – He neither accepted first century Judaism, nor rejected it. Parts of the early Church really struggled to understand where this left them: if Gentiles wanted to follow Jesus, did they need to become Jews, as Jesus was? The answer, confusingly, was both 'yes' and 'no': 'yes' to choosing the God of Abraham, 'no' to circumcision and the law.

We see Peter struggling with his Jewish culture and identity in the book of Acts: when he sees the vision of the sheet, Peter initially rejects God's command to eat the unclean animals, because it is against his religion. God insisted and Peter got the message, but it is a very hard lesson to learn: ever since that pivotal moment, many people have made the other choice – they have turned their backs on God in order to follow their religion.

Clearly, the Old Testament was important for the early Church, but we need to be clear why and how was it important. The Church believed that God was present in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and so we can get to know God through Jesus' words and deeds.

Jesus spoke in a language and acted within a culture shaped by the Old Testament. His actions spoke at a human level – everyone can appreciate the importance of feeding and healing – but they also spoke powerfully in a symbolic way. The meaning of the words he spoke and the symbolism of His actions can only be properly understood in the context in which He lived.

The Old Testament is vital, because without it we cannot understand Jesus – and if we do not understand, we cannot follow. When we see what Jesus took and what He rejected of the culture and customs of His day, and understand something of the significance of His choices to the people of His day, we can begin to engage with our own culture and customs, and seek to discern God's will for our own time.

A New Kingdom

Jesus came to proclaim and inaugurate a new Kingdom. That much, the Jews were expecting. But Jesus takes the common expectation and subverts it: the new Kingdom is not of this world. This new Kingdom has citizens, but no borders.

Let's think about that for a moment: a Kingdom with citizens, but no borders, no limits. There is nothing to say: this is where the rule of the Kingdom stops. New Kingdoms come and go with depressing frequency, but this was something else: not only a new Kingdom, but a new kind of Kingdom.

A kingdom, of course, is a kind of state. There are different varieties, with different names, but the distinctions are not important here. The head of state normally gets the job in one of three ways: through inheritance, through election or through fighting for it. However they achieve it, the head of state leads a political entity which claims the sole right to the legitimate use of force within its borders.

The use of force is central to all earthly states: they must deter or repel foreign invaders, suppress internal rebellions and enforce state laws. These essential roles require an infrastructure, and the more complex the society the greater the amount of infrastructure that is required.

A complex society requires complex laws. So you need a government to determine the laws, a judiciary to determine if someone has broken the laws, officers to enforce the penalty when this has taken place, and tax collectors to ensure that all this activity can be paid for. And all these activities require the use, or the threat of the use, of state sanctioned force.

But the Kingdom of God has no borders, so there is no need of an army to protect them; its one law is the law of love, so there is no need for a government to decide the laws; the Spirit of Jesus guides our conscience, so there is no need for judges to decide if we have broken the law; and when we are guilty, the state forgives us, so there is no need for officers to punish us.

The law of love cannot be imposed by force, it can only be recognised and accepted. You cannot force anyone to love, and any attempt to do so would be counter-productive. The Kingdom of God does not require force to sustain it – and when we understand the nature of the Kingdom, we see that the ways of the Kingdom prevent the use of force, whether we want to protect it or promote it. As Jesus told Pilate: His Kingdom is not of this world, which is why His followers do not fight.

A Kingdom for All

This Kingdom has no borders, and nobody is excluded. Everybody is invited, encouraged, to become a citizen. The mission of Jesus, and the mission of His followers, is for the whole world to participate in the Kingdom of God.

This is the fulfilment of the promise God made to Abraham: through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed. The Kingdom of God will permeate every nation on earth, as people discover that the rule of love is the only cause on earth worth living and dying for, and it is a cause you cannot pursue through the use of force.

Nobody is excluded from the Kingdom of God. Your past life does not exclude you: whatever you have done, you are forgiven and given a fresh start. Your ignorance does not exclude you: the Holy Spirit will dwell within you and lead you into all truth. Your weakness does not exclude you: The Holy Spirit will empower you. Your needs do not exclude you: Jesus is your bread and drink, is all you need.

This Kingdom is open to everyone, but none of us are capable of living as citizens of the Kingdom. Jesus shows us what Kingdom living is like, and in doing so, He shows us how far short we fall, demonstrates that we are incapable of Kingdom living – incapable under our own power, that is, incapable if we rely on our own resources, incapable even with the encouragement and support of each other.

It is clear that we cannot pursue Jesus' mission without also embracing His method: to find spiritual life in Him, to find in Him not just our teacher and example, but also the source of our life. We can live in the Kingdom of God because Kingdom living is what He does; He lives in us and through us: He is the vine and we are the branches.

The converse is also true: we cannot express His life without partaking in His mission – as we live His life, we open up the Kingdom of justice and peace to all we met, without exception. We cannot withhold His love from anyone, because that is not what His life does. As we share in His life and love, so we also share His life and love with others: the measure we give is the measure we will receive.

This Kingdom has no borders, either external or internal. All people, and all of life, is included. Jesus claims dominion over all I am and over all I do – not because He wants the power, but because He loves me and understands what is best for me.

An Upside-Down Kingdom

This may be obvious from what has been said already, but we need to spell it out because in this area it is easy for people to miss the obvious. When you compare the Kingdom of God with the kingdom of this world – the way things are at present – you cannot understand the Kingdom of God as just an improvement over the current system, or as fixing the problems with the current system. The Kingdom of God both overthrows and overturns the kingdom of this world.

The Kingdom of God overthrows the kingdom of this world: you cannot give allegiance to both, and you cannot successfully function in both. You cannot serve two masters. There are only two paths we can tread: if you do not choose life and love, then you choose death and destruction.

The Kingdom of God overturns the kingdom of this world: from the perspective of this world, the people and practices of God's Kingdom are completely wrong – they seem to get everything that matters back-to-front and upside-down. Of course, the same is true when we look at this world from the Kingdom of God. Donald Kraybill uses this image very effectively in his book, 'The Upside-Down Kingdom', covering such topics as politics, success, holiness, status, economics, enemies and violence: we are called to embrace sharing instead of hoarding; service instead of status; basins instead of swords; the way of the cross instead of power.

Religion and Culture

The early Church had two obvious and straightforward choices – either embrace the Old Testament or reject it – but very few Christians have done either. Instead, most Christians, for most of the history of the Church, have rejected much of the theology of the Old Testament but (with the exception of the sacrificial system, food regulations and aspects of the ritual ceremonies) embraced its practice.

Most of the things people outside the Church associate with Christianity, and most of the things which the majority of Christians through the centuries have regarded as holy – church buildings, priests, vestments, rituals, Sabbath worship and annual festivals – are a mixture of culture and religion taken directly from the Old Testament. Which is strange, because Jesus and the early Christians clearly taught that none of these things are important.

Even the family, for many people the fundamental building-block of any stable society, was not considered to be important by the early Church. Of course, we have to do our duty to our families when we can – but following Jesus must come first. Our family is important, but Jesus is more important – just as our culture is important, but the Kingdom of God is more important.

Our culture is important to us: it tells us who we are, by giving us a history, a way of living in the present, and a set of expectations for the future. It tells us where we came from, and it tells us what to do in the small but important details of life, and how to mark time. It tells us which stories about our ancestors are important; it tells us what to eat, how to dress, how to show respect and appear respectable; and it tells us how to mark the passing weeks, month and years, and how to celebrate the milestones in our lives such as birth, puberty, marriage and death.

And because culture tells us who we are, it also tells us who we are not: every culture implicitly divides us from them, people who do not belong to our culture, the outsiders. This generally works at numerous levels, all at the same time – our family is normal, while yours is a bit strange; our village is honest and straightforward, but you can't really trust the folk from the next village over there; we Northerners are friendly, while them Southerners are stuck-up; the British are practical and efficient, while the French ... You may not share these exact prejudices, but the details are irrelevant: what matters is the basic division between 'us' and 'them'.

Any organised religion is a structure which seeks to embody a spirituality, an understanding of our ultimate values, the things which matter most to us; it is the expression of a spirituality, the way a group of people expresses their shared spirituality. And religion, too, serves to divide people to separate 'us' from 'them', friends from foes, those who are 'in' from those who are 'out'.

Most societies, through almost all history, have been bound together by a shared religion and culture. Indeed, religion itself is often understood, not as a system for dealing with the supernatural, but as a means of social control, binding people to the community and the state. It has often been observed that states which reject all religion invariably end up making a religion of the state and its leader.

For most people, religion is functionally indistinguishable from culture: religion gives us the big answers, and culture gives us the small details, but in practice the religion is encountered through the culture – the rituals and words used at the significant moments in our lives, the judgements made about our choices, the options made available to us concerning who we can marry, how we bring up our children and how we dispose of the dead. So, while most of us can distinguish between religion and culture without difficulty in our heads, we find it hard – perhaps impossible – to do so in our hearts.

This gives many Christians a practical problem: how do we distinguish clearly between what is essential in the religion we have chosen to follow, and what is simply a cultural expression of that religion; between what is important and what is simply familiar and comfortable. We may be deeply attached to buildings with pointy windows and Victorian hymns, but when we think about it we recognise that they are only cultural expressions, and not vital aspects of our faith.

Our lives are inevitably bound up in both cultural and religious structures. These structures are good and necessary, they give shape to our lives and our communities, but they are not ultimately important. They do a job, but if that job can be better done another way, they should be changed. They matter, like food matters: we need to eat a healthy diet, but it matters not whether this is the food of India, Israel or Italy.

Gospel and Kingdom

In the New Testament, the gospel message is a proclamation of the coming and newly present Kingdom. *The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, so repent and believe the good news*: God's Kingdom has been brought into being and is now accessible to you; so turn around, turn away from the kingdom of this world and turn to God's Kingdom; believe this message, embrace this new reality and live as a citizen of the Kingdom.

This means that, in the New Testament, the gospel message is an invitation to change your allegiance, not your religion. Every country has an ultimate authority, and if you belong to the Kingdom of God then Jesus is your ultimate authority. Each person can have only one ultimate authority: if you acknowledge that Jesus is Lord – not just ‘a lord’, not just one of the important people in your life, but your Lord and Master – then nobody else can be Lord in your life, and you will be in conflict with anyone and everyone who claims that authority over you.

Of course, there are many other important details to be understood: Jesus spent a great deal of time teaching His followers about the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of Heaven – the two things mean the same), and showing them what the Kingdom looks like when you live it and start to share Kingdom life with others. You need to understand about love, and forgiveness, and counting the cost, and trusting your heavenly Father, and healing, and baptism, and discipleship, and the family of God, and many other things. And they are all important, but none of them matter unless you embrace the Kingdom of God and acknowledge Jesus as Lord.

Jesus did not come to overthrow Caesar, but He did come to challenge the absolute authority Caesar claimed: give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s. This does not divide the world into two kingdoms, each with their respective area of authority; instead, it recognises that while Caesar does have some authority, God has more.

As Peter invited the Sanhedrin to recognise, whenever there is any conflict between them, we have to obey God rather than man – whether that is the Sanhedrin with its spiritual authority or Caesar with his worldly authority.

This new Kingdom challenges every structure, every system, every state and every religion – not by seeking to destroy or abolish them, but by denying that they have any ultimate authority. Whatever the human system, insofar as its teachings and practices are consistent with the Kingdom of God, the system is valid and can be obeyed; but where they are inconsistent, it has to be opposed.

Culture and Kingdom

The Kingdom of God does not have any distinctive culture: the citizens of the Kingdom adopt, as best they can, the culture of the place where they physically live. The Epistle to Diognetus, one of the earliest pieces of Christian writing outside the New Testament which has survived, describes this very neatly:

“Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom. For nowhere do they live in cities of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric lifestyle ... they live in both Greek and barbarian cities, as each one’s lot was cast, and follow the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life ...”

But this does not mean an unthinking acceptance of the local culture: we have to test it against the teachings and practices of the Kingdom, and stand against it where they differ. To take one example: in the Early Church, Kingdom living required a rejection of infanticide, which was commonly practiced in the Roman world; today, the challenge for many of us is more likely to be around materialism and greed.

We find this difficult – apart from the difficulty of grasping and living Kingdom values when they conflict with the standards and expectations of our natural culture, we naturally find ourselves bonding with people who share our culture, in opposition to people from other cultures. This is, as we have noted, the primary job of culture – to tell us who we are, and who we are not, who is ‘us’ and who is ‘them’.

But the call of Jesus requires us to identify ourselves primarily with Him and with His family – taken from every nation and tribe and people and language, a family of people belonging to every human culture. We have to let go of the things that divide us because we are united with Jesus, and Jesus came to unite all people.

We are called to live in a way that demonstrates we are one with people who are culturally alien to us, we are more ‘one with’ these strangers and foreigners than we are with people we have grown up beside. The way that culture and religion function has, for us, been turned upside-down: no more ‘in’ and ‘out’ because everyone is in.

One Body

There are few teachings in the New Testament which are so repeated and emphasised as the unity of the Church: there is only one Church, one Body of Christ. In His ‘High Priestly’ prayer in John’s Gospel, Jesus prays that we, His followers, will be one. For all their failures, this is one doctrine the Apostles seemed to grasp, even if they were not always able to live it out as fully as they might.

Most of the time, we seem content to take this as a piece – an important piece – of abstract theology. There can only be one Church, because the Church consists of all those who are united with Jesus, and there is only one Jesus. QED.

But, if we understand it this way, then ‘one Church’ is simply a consequence of our definition of Church – it hardly seems like something worth emphasising. It’s rather like noting that one plus one equals two: an important mathematical truth, but we don’t go around repeating it on every other page, even in maths text books.

So what is happening here? Why is it so important? Why does Paul make a point of pleading in Philippians 4 for Euodia and Syntyche to be of one mind? Because the unity of the Body of Christ is not just an abstract doctrine: it is the essence of our calling. Jesus came to destroy divisions, to overcome everything which keeps us separated from each other and separated from God.

Some divisions are necessary, of course: we are to stand on the side of truth, opposed to falsehood and ignorance; we are to stand on the side of love, opposed to hatred and indifference. But these are not ‘us’ against ‘them’ distinctions – there is enough falsehood, ignorance, hatred and indifference within the Church; there is enough of such things within each one of us to make it clear that we cannot divide between people on this basis.

And if unity is the essence of our calling, then we have to live it, to demonstrate it, to make it real. If we follow Jesus, we cannot afford to tolerate division, we cannot treat it as acceptable. If we follow Jesus, who tore down the dividing wall between enemies in order to draw all people to Himself, then we too must do all we can to tear down the walls which divide people

Unlimited Love

Jesus and the early Church were not setting up a new religion: they were proclaiming and inaugurating the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom embraces all people and all cultures, but wherever it is expressed in some practical way, then our activity must express some specific culture – either borrowed from outside, or created for that particular group. The Kingdom is universal, but each congregation is local: it has to speak the language of that specific place and time.

Some worship is liturgical, some spontaneous; some is loud and enthusiastic; some is quiet and reverential; some focuses more on the emotional and some on the intellectual. There are people who will be attracted and some who will be put off by each of these styles, and it is hard to combine them in any meaningful way – but whatever our corporate culture, we must welcome people from all cultures and backgrounds – as they are, without turning them into people like us.

We know we must love one another, but very often ‘one another’ tends to be people who look like us; we need to love our neighbour, but our neighbours also tend to look like us. We sometimes forget that the story of the Good Samaritan answers the question, “Who is my neighbour” and tells us that the neighbour I need to love may be a stranger from a different and despised culture.

Christians often point to the fact that we are called to love other people. But many other groups encourage and celebrate love – we don’t have a monopoly here. The distinctive thing about Christian love is that we are called to love and accept and do good to everyone: no boundaries, no restrictions, no conditions. Religions divide and exclude people, but in Jesus we are called to do the opposite.

Our culture, our heritage and our background shaped us, made us who we are. They shaped our past, but they do not have to shape our future: in Jesus, we can discover what it means to belong, not to a religion which excludes people, but to God’s unlimited, unrestricted, all-embracing Kingdom.

Next steps

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

- Is it helpful?
- Would you change anything?
- Would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form at mad-bristol or join the conversation on the *Strong Foundations* site.

- Web form: <http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>
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