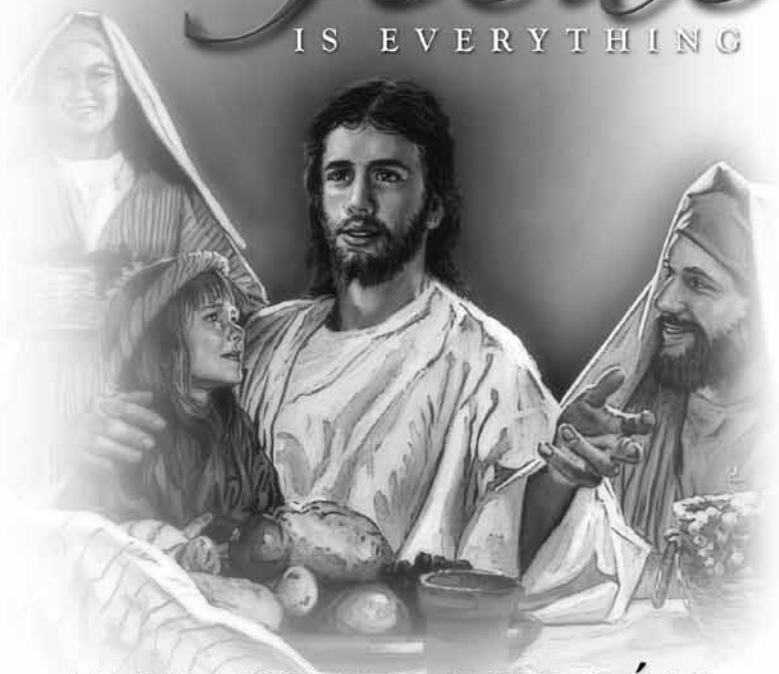


S H A R I N G

# Jesus

I S E V E R Y T H I N G



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## Chapter 1

# What Kingdom Are We Building?

From habit, my feet follow the path while thoughts whirl through my mind. Oblivious to the lovely evening, I barely notice the glow from the full moon. From my jumbled thoughts, I want to articulate so many things; I long to reach beyond my limited human understanding of spiritual things and the hardness of my own heart. The rhythm of my steps brings to mind Jesus' walks with His uncomprehending disciples. I cringe with shame. I am no different from the disciples! Two thousand years later, I stand here, no wiser than any of the Twelve.

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Jesus' repeated attempts to communicate spiritual truths to His disciples met with failure. They nodded as if comprehending. He used familiar vocabulary, but somehow, they repeatedly missed His meaning. It was almost as if Jesus were broadcasting in one frequency, and the disciples were tuned to a different one. The Master would speak of spiritual things, but his listeners, hampered by human teaching or expectations, would, instead, arrive at some conclusion related to daily life or material concerns.

Think of that midnight interview between Nicodemus and the Master. Jesus brought up the topic of new birth. Jesus minced no words; He launched directly into a discussion of spiritual rebirth—conversion. Every person needs a conversion experience in order to live the Christian life, but Nicodemus puzzled over Jesus' choice of

words. He blurted out, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (John 3:4). Nicodemus was highly educated, a spiritual leader among God’s chosen people; nevertheless, he completely missed the spiritual intent of what Jesus tried to tell him.

Some time later, the Master sat by a village well where He began a conversation about the water of life with a startled Samaritan woman. Jesus told her about an amazing grace that is capable of quenching spiritual thirst in parched human souls, but she, too, failed to grasp the spiritual meaning. She quipped in response, “Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water?” (John 4:11). He talked about Heaven’s refreshment, and she was thinking of well water. How tragic!

Mark 8 includes yet another story illustrating the difficulty human beings have in catching on to spiritual things: “Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, and they did not have more than one loaf with them in the boat. Then He charged them, saying, ‘Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.’ And they reasoned among themselves, saying, ‘It is because we have no bread’ ” (Mark 8:14–16). The disciples’ response is almost humorous. Their viewpoint was again limited to the human and material.

Jesus came to this world to establish His spiritual kingdom; not once did He promote an earthly kingdom. John had announced His coming to establish a spiritual kingdom: “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’ ” (Matthew 3:1, 2). As predicted, Jesus also spoke of the spiritual nature of His kingdom—126 times in the four Gospels. None of these references included the slightest reason for the disciples to think He referred to an earthly kingdom. His message was made clear by illustrating His spiritual kingdom in terms such as salt, light, yeast, and mustard seed.

But the disciples seemed unable to modify their preconceptions that the Messiah would be a warrior who would defeat the Roman legions and restore Israel as an independent nation. When the disciples visualized the kingdom of heaven, they did so according to human expectations. In their desire for an earthly kingdom, they overlooked the term *heaven* as Jesus taught about the “kingdom of heaven.” How ironic that the disciples could talk about the “kingdom of heaven” while simultaneously campaigning for a position of power in the new kingdom.

Throughout His three years of ministry on earth, Jesus repeatedly attempted to teach the disciples about the spiritual nature of His kingdom. Unfortunately, right up to the end, they were still self-deluded. That’s why Jesus’ crucifixion left them disillusioned, feeling defeated and abandoned.

The Sunday evening following the Crucifixion, while two disciples were walking home to Emmaus, their hopes shattered, one of them, Cleopas, commented to the Stranger who had caught up with them: “ ‘Are You the only stranger in Jerusalem, and have You not known the things which happened there in these days?’ And He said to them, ‘What things?’ So they said to Him, ‘The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him. But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel’ ” (Luke 24:18–21).

Why were Cleopas’s words so pessimistic? “We had hoped that He would be the Redeemer of Israel,” he lamented. The dejected disciples had completely failed to grasp the meaning of the kingdom Jesus came to establish. They were unaware that the betrayal and sufferings Jesus willingly endured, and His death on the cross, were necessary to enable the promised redemption. They concluded that Jesus had simply let them down. It’s hard to imagine anyone failing

a final exam more miserably than those students of the Master.

Praise God, Jesus never forsakes those who fail. He is the God of second chances, always ready to write on a blank page. That same Sunday evening He appeared to His disciples, who were cowering behind locked doors, fearful that they, too, would face betrayal and suffering. Suddenly, Jesus was among them, calming their fears, lifting their depression, and challenging them to begin building His kingdom.

What kingdom could they possibly build now if during three years with the Master Teacher they had learned so little? In His compassion, Jesus gave the disciples a second chance, an accelerated remedial class; He remained with them for an additional forty days to clarify the spiritual nature of His kingdom. Luke describes these forty days: “He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3).

The kingdom of God had been the central theme of Jesus’ ministry during the previous three years. But the Twelve had learned so little. Now resurrected, waiting to return to heaven, Jesus graciously remained with the Eleven these additional forty days, and once again He emphasized the very same theme—the kingdom of God. But wait; He had additional instruction for the disciples: don’t leave Jerusalem. You must wait right here for the promised Holy Spirit. Why would He give such command? Because the kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom and it can be built only under the guiding hand of the Spirit.

To compare the two kingdoms (the earthly kingdom for which the disciples hoped, and the spiritual kingdom that He was promoting), Jesus used the example of two baptisms to help His followers picture the difference. Consider the baptism practiced by John, immersion in water—a visible act. In modern baptisms,

family and friends gather as witnesses, taking photos and celebrating the occasion. Candidates' names are recorded in church books; certificates are handed out. But now Jesus pointed to another baptism, that of the Spirit. Different from water baptism, the baptism of the Spirit is totally invisible. No photos can capture it because the kingdom of God works from the inside and grows like the mustard seed, salt, or yeast. Names of those receiving this baptism are not recorded by the church secretary in books. They can be recorded only in the books of heaven.

It was Jesus' last day on earth. The final message had been given; the Redeemer longed for reassurance that they at last understood the spiritual nature of His kingdom. Then, one of them raised his hand and asked a question: "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). How painful!

Imagine the letdown Jesus must have felt. There He was, ready to ascend, and His beloved disciples still hadn't understood the mission. In His final recorded words, He tells them how to build the spiritual kingdom, a glorious church, without spot or wrinkle, the bride He hopes to meet when He returns. "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). To build the kingdom of God, every disciple will have to become a witness. Without the personal testimony of each and every Christian, the kingdom of God would never exist.

More than twenty centuries have passed since that day, and each must ask him- or herself these questions, Do I understand the spiritual nature of the kingdom of God? Am I helping to build His kingdom, or am I simply following a human agenda? Is simply labeling what I am building "kingdom of God" enough to make it that? Could it be that while I think I am building the Lord's kingdom, I am merely promoting a human kingdom, one that I like to call the "kingdom of God"?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to understand first the nature of God's kingdom. It is not made out of material things but of human beings; they represent its basic material, if we can refer to lives in those terms. These are people prepared to meet the returning King: men and women who reflect the character of Jesus, beautiful people who, when they walk down the streets, illuminate the world with the glory of the Lord.

Ellen White describes these people:

The last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love. The children of God are to manifest His glory. In their own life and character they are to reveal what the grace of God has done for them (*Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 415, 416).

The great purpose of the kingdom of God is redeeming people. Despite the fact that it is a spiritual kingdom, much of its work still takes place on this earth, and for that reason it needs a visible structure. That's why while we continue to live in this world; the kingdom of God needs churches, chapels, publishing houses, hospitals, money, and accounting records. The structure is part of the spiritual kingdom of God; it can't be separated from the kingdom as long as we are pilgrims on this planet.

The danger lies in confusing kingdom and structure, in trying to measure the growth of the kingdom of God by focusing on the structure's expansion. Let me ask a pointed question: Is it possible to achieve structural growth without simultaneously achieving growth in the kingdom of God?

I want to share an incident that illustrates my point. During 1988 we were busy preparing to hold the largest evangelistic series in the history of the church in Brazil. Twenty thousand people were expected nightly at the great covered Ibirapuera Stadium in

São Paulo. This ambitious vision depended on the active participation of many wonderful workers—people who cheerfully gave hours of work and sacrificial financial donations. Two businessmen wanted to get involved in a massive publicity campaign, using a variety of communication media. Consequently, we met with a group of professionals from an advertising firm. One of them asked us: “What kind of public are you going after? We can fill the stadium with the kind of people you prefer—youth, women, elderly people, handicapped—whatever you want.”

My first reaction was that this man was simply arrogant, but as he continued, I began to see how powerful advertising really can be. The world practically follows what publicity dictates. Rarely do consumers go for anything other than what the commercials push in their faces—cars, clothes, prepared foods, beauty products, and on and on. The presenter proudly affirmed, for example, that Coca-Cola had become something on the order of a new religion because of marketing. “Who do you think made Coca-Cola what it is today in Brazil? I’ll tell you, it was us!”

At that moment, one of my colleagues posed a question: “And if we wanted to mount a publicity blitz promoting our church, would that swell the number of new members?”

“Without a doubt,” the man replied. “The only thing is you would need about ten years to build churches, halls, stadiums, and all that sort of thing, because, after all, with your present infrastructure, where could you put all the people who would join your church as a result of our professional services?”

Frankly, I was perplexed. That man wasn’t exaggerating. Publicity can sell just about anything, including a philosophy of life. So why do we need the Holy Spirit? Leading crowds of people into church membership shouldn’t be that hard; raking in more money and putting up more schools, publishing houses, and churches would clearly not be impossible if left to skilled human hands.



If we were to hire a successful CEO like the ones who have accomplished the explosive growth of companies such as Google, Apple, Honda, and Microsoft, wouldn't it be possible to do the same, causing our church to fabulously expand its consumer base? Not much need then for the Holy Spirit; all we need is sharp business know-how. With this kind of executive genius, after about three years, the books would show amazing results, with lines shooting off the graph, illustrating membership numbers, financial growth, and development around the world. Denominational wealth in property holdings would soar. But here's the bottom line: would all that success reflect the glory of God and the character of Jesus Christ?

By applying leadership and administrative techniques alone, it is possible to grow the structure of the church without necessarily adding to the kingdom of God. At the same time, it is impossible to grow God's kingdom without some structural growth.

My motivation in writing this book is to address the danger we face of misunderstanding what really constitutes the kingdom of God. That was the tragedy among Jesus' disciples, and it could turn out to be our great failure as well. Today, the kingdom of God is equipped with institutions, members, statistics, budgets, and accountants; but the kingdom is much more than just that. If we Christians fail to grow spiritually, if the church fails to lead each new convert to a life of continuing communion with God, if Christians cease praying, studying the Bible, and leading others to Jesus' feet, then we aren't participating in the kingdom of God.

It would be disastrous if we come to believe that expanding the kingdom of God is simply a numbers game. If our enthusiasm to swell the kingdom of God focuses on strategies to increase membership and income, we misunderstand the purpose of the kingdom. Just about any great executive could grow the structure. If that is all we want, there's no need for the Holy Spirit. The chal-

lence to the church is to help each member grow spiritually, which, in turn, will increase membership and financial support.

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It is evening as I finish writing this chapter at a hotel in Atlanta. To my right is a window out of which I can see cars heading to their destinations. I think about the drivers behind the wheel, and I feel sorrow for their pain—the pain of living without Christ. Then, I hear again Jesus’ challenge: “Go invite people to become part of My kingdom. Don’t simply make them members of the church; help them become truly spiritual men and women. For this purpose I promise you the gift of My Spirit.”

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### Questions to Consider

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1. Why did Jesus teach His disciples by means of parables?
  2. Why did the disciples so often fail to understand the Master’s teachings?
  3. Do we understand the Word of the Lord in our time?
  4. How difficult it is to bring a person to Jesus’ feet?
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