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Historically, outsiders to Churches of Christ have noticed the great unity and uniformity of faith and practice that characterize our fellowship. As Frank Mead put it, in his classic *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, “Since the status of [their] institutions is unofficial, none authorized to speak for the entire church, their conformity in ideas and teachings is all the more remarkable.” That is, despite the lack of institutional, denominational superstructure or adherence to a written confessional standard, Churches of Christ have traditionally maintained a surprisingly strong sense of identity. This common identity is exemplified in the common observation that, until the late twentieth century, one could walk into almost any Church of Christ and predict exactly what would be done and said.

This characteristic identity, reflected in a relative uniformity of doctrine and liturgy, has noticeably eroded over the past few decades. Now, those who enter an assembly of the Church of Christ can no longer predict with the same degree of accuracy what they will find. A variety of cultural and religious factors have further loosened the ties that once maintained the unity of belief and practice in this loose affiliation of congregations. It is important, therefore, for members of Churches of Christ to reflect on issues related to our identity—past, present, and future.

In this issue of *Christian Studies*, we have asked contributors to keep in mind the very broad but important question about the identity of Churches of Christ. This question thus serves as a general thread that runs through the various articles. In their own way, and sometimes with different results, these articles touch on this concept by indirectly addressing questions such as: What has shaped the identity of Churches of Christ in the past? How can this identity be characterized at present? What does, or should, its future look like? What beliefs and practices are, or should be, central? What is, or should be, our relationship with other denominations, with evangelicalism, and with the world? All these questions, and more, are worth our contemplation, and the articles included in this issue are intended to initiate or extend such conversations not only among Churches of Christ, but among other groups who are wrestling with similar questions.

For many reasons, the faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology wishes to dedicate this issue of *Christian Studies* to David Worley. Dr. Worley has donated his time, energy, and resources to the ministry at Austin Grad, including service to the school as president (1992–2000) and as chancellor (2001–present). In addition to being a New Testament scholar, he is a model shepherd and an outstanding example of Christian devotion and piety—exhibiting unity in necessary things, charity in all things, and patient endurance in trials. More specific to the theme of this issue, as long as I have known him, David has been a tireless advocate for preserving and passing on to others what is best about Churches of Christ, and he does so in a winsome, non-sectarian way. It is our hope that this issue reflects something of his interests and integrity, that he is honored by the questions and tentative answers found here, and that all readers will find the enterprise stimulating and edifying.

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God in Action: Restoring Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom

Daniel Austin Napier

By all accounts, the center of Jesus' message—his “gospel”—was an announcement of the kingdom of God. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all emphasize it. Historical-critical scholars, who as a class agree on very few things about Jesus, offer nearly unanimous assent to this bit of testimony. Oddly, the place one is least likely to hear Jesus' gospel of the kingdom expounded today may be in church.

In the churches of my youth, I was taught a different gospel—really a fragment of Paul's message—without any reference to the kingdom. A rough summary of the gospel I heard was that “Jesus died for your sins. If you believe and confess this at baptism, you will go to heaven when you die.” Please don't misunderstand. Those who taught me were devout, faithful people. Moreover, that Jesus gave his life for you and me certainly is good news. If reflectively received, this message will produce significant gratitude. However, when detached from Jesus' gospel, this message leaves us in a world without God actively present. God worked *then* in Jesus' death, for which we're appreciative, but there haven't been any sightings lately.¹

¹ The broadly Deist or, perhaps “Supernatural Rationalist,” proclivities and assumptions, which the Campbell's inherited from John Locke, receive an introductory discussion in C. Leonard Allen and Richard T. Hughes, *Discovering our Roots: The Ancestry of Churches of Christ* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1988), 75–87.

My experience may or may not be representative.² However, in my limited experience, this absence of Jesus' teachings might be especially acute if one's home were in certain quarters of the Restoration Movement. Two related factors have tended to mute Jesus' message in Churches of Christ.

First, Jesus' "kingdom" to come was often taken as referring to the establishment of the church at Pentecost.³ Jesus' teachings were taken largely as predictions concerning an event accomplished early in Acts. Like Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah, they primarily functioned apologetically in church of Christ preaching to demonstrate God had accomplished much of his "plan of salvation."

Second, a broader misconception served as accomplice for this move. By mixing a quasi-Augustinian conflation of kingdom and church⁴ with elements of dispensationalism⁵, Churches of Christ rendered the gospels irrelevant for church life in the current age. Preachers declared that the "Law" had been "nailed to the cross." Ironically, they tended to fasten the teachings of Jesus there beside it. Since Jesus' teachings were delivered to people who lived prior to the crucifixion and thus "under law", they were no longer binding upon those living after his death and resurrection. Thus we were encouraged to pattern our corporate and personal lives from commands and examples found in Acts and the epistles.

² John Mark Hicks and Bobby Valentine, *Kingdom Come: Embracing the Spiritual Legacy of David Lipscomb and James Harding* (Abilene: Leafwood, 2006) tell a gripping story of an alternative ethos and approach to the kingdom within Churches of Christ.

³ Edward C. Wharton, *The Church of Christ: A Presentation of the Distinctive Nature and Identity of the New Testament church*. (West Monroe, LA: Howard Book House, 1987), 76–83.

⁴ For Augustine's more nuanced identification of the church with the kingdom of heaven on earth, see civ. Dei 20.9. An accessible translation may be found in Augustine, William S. Babcock, and Boniface Ramsey, *The City of God (De Civitate Dei) XI–XXII* (New York: New City press, 2013), 405ff.

⁵ Classical dispensationalism identified the "kingdom" with the "millennial reign of Christ" rather than with the church. Nonetheless, because the "kingdom" was postponed due to the Jews' rejection of Jesus and the teachings of Jesus were addressed toward that state, his teachings refer primarily to a condition that is not "now." A good statement of this position may be found in Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 2007), especially note his discussion of the Sermon on the Mount on pp. 96ff.

With this strange absence in mind—and recognizing the shining exceptions—I would like to offer a reexamination of the message at the heart of the gospels. I offer the following exposition in hopes that we in the Churches of Christ will incorporate it into our preaching and allow it to shape our lives.

Overview

Jesus' gospel introduces us to a different, God-saturated world. Consider this summary of Jesus' core message as found in Mark 1:14–15:

And after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.

In the simplest possible terms, the "kingdom of God" refers to *what God is doing*—how God, as king, is acting to reshape the world. Jesus clues us in to the fact that God is in action right where we live. That is the core of his message. In this article, I want to show how we know this was the import of Jesus' message and then unpack what this means in terms of our experience today.

Historical-Linguistic Basis for "Kingdom of God" as God in Action

The kingdom of God was a readily understandable and frequently used phrase in Jesus' day. While the robust statements of YHWH as King in the Hebrew Bible provide a conceptual backdrop, the precise phrase "kingdom of God" was absent from earlier sections of Scripture.⁶ Our best access to the range of meanings this specific phrase carried for Jesus' ordinary hearers comes by considering its occurrences in the targums for Isaiah and the Minor Prophets.

A targum is an Aramaic gloss on the Hebrew Bible. By Jesus' day most Jews could not understand classical Hebrew and needed a translation into their spoken tongue, Aramaic. So targums were originally presented orally in

⁶ Two rich yet accessible discussions of this broader doctrine of God's reign may be found in John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953). Also, see John Gray, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Reign of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979).

the synagogue following a reading of the corresponding section in Hebrew.⁷ Later, these traditional interpretations were committed to writing.⁸ Some targums—especially those on the prophets—tended toward paraphrase and interpretive expansions. (If you are comparing these targums to English Bibles, think of *The Message* rather than the *New American Standard*.) These free expansions are helpful because they allow us to overhear ideas as they circulated at the popular, grassroots level in Jesus’ day.

In terms of method, we learn what Jesus’ hearers associated with the phrase “kingdom of God” by comparing its appearance in a targum to the original Hebrew passage. One can easily do this by comparing the English translation of the targumic passage to a literal English translation of the corresponding Hebrew text (the NASB is good for this purpose). For the reader’s convenience, I have provided a representative set of parallel passages one may compare. Those words italicized in the targum translations below either have no corresponding word in the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible, or significantly differ in nuance and thus would not be expected as a literal

⁷ A lector would read the Hebrew text, then an Aramaic translation would be delivered from memory by a “*meturgeman*” or interpreter. The interpreter was not permitted to look at a text while translating “so that they [the listeners] will not say the translation is written in the Torah” (Bay, 32a). The two were performed in alternation. One verse from the Torah would be followed by one verse of targum. Up to three verses of the prophets could be followed by a targum of those verses. For a basic introduction to the targums and their character, see Philip S. Alexander, “Jewish Aramaic Translations of Scriptures” in M. J. Mulder and Harry Sysling, eds., *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading, and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1990), 217–53.

⁸ Chronology of content is a specialized issue in targum research. Recognizing tradition necessarily plays an important role in dating these texts. In particular, the way these glosses were memorized and passed on as tradition, requires a methodological distinction between various dates of (oral) composition and the eventual date of writing. There are often several layers of composition and scholars differ on the dates given. For an overview of the issues involved see Bruce D. Chilton, *Galilean Rabbi and his Bible: Jesus’ Use of the Interpreted Scripture of his Time* (Wilmington, Del: Glazier, 1984), 35–147. Also, see Martin McNamara, *Targum and Testament Revisited: Aramaic Paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible: a light on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), and Alexander, “Aramaic Translations.”

translation of the Hebrew original (such as from ‘king’ / *melek* to ‘kingdom’ / *malkut*).⁹

Kingdom of God: Key Targumic References Compared with the Hebrew Bible

Is. Targum 31.4, “For the LORD said to me, As a lion or a young lion *roars* over its prey, and, when a band of shepherds *are appointed* against it, it is not *broken up* at their shouting or *checked* at their *tumult* so *the kingdom of* the LORD of hosts will *be revealed* to settle upon *the Mount of Zion* and upon its hill.”¹⁰

Is. 31:4 (NASB) “For thus says the Lord to me, ‘As the lion or the young lion growls over his prey, against which a band of shepherds is called out, will not be terrified at their voice, nor disturbed at their noise, so will the Lord of hosts come down to wage war on Mount Zion and on its hill.’”

Is. Targum 40.9-10, “Get you up to a high mountain, *prophets who herald good tidings to Zion*; lift up your voice with force, *you who herald good tidings to Jerusalem*, lift up, fear not; say to the cities *of the house of Judah*, “*The kingdom of your God will be revealed!*” Behold, the LORD God *will be revealed* with strength, and *the strength of his mighty arm rules before him*; behold *the reward of those who perform his Memra*¹¹ is with him, *all those whose deeds are disclosed* before him.”¹²

Is. 40:9-10 (NASB), “Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’ Behold, the Lord God will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him.”

⁹ Italics were provided in the translations cited below. I have, however, found they exaggerated the differences and I have made corrections as needed. Corrections are indicated in the footnotes.

¹⁰ Bruce Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990).

¹¹ In many instances including this one, Memra may simply be equivalent to “the Word of God,” however, in other cases it seems to be a circumlocution for the ineffable name of God or identified as the light which shone at the beginning. Thus it is transliterated, rather than translated, in this series. For a thorough discussion of the literature on the subject, see McNamara, *Targum and Testament*, 154–166.

¹² Chilton, *Isaiah Targum*. italics and tenses corrected.

Obad. Targum 21, “Liberators shall go up to Mount Zion to judge the *citadel* of Esau, and the kingdom of the Lord *shall be revealed over all the inhabitants of the earth.*”¹³

Obad. 21 (NASB), “The deliverers will ascend Mount Zion to judge the mountain of Esau, and the kingdom will be the Lord’s.”

Micah Targum 4.6-7, “At that *time*, says the Lord *God*, I will assemble together the *exiled*, and I will gather together *the scattered*, and those *who were* treated harshly *on account of the sins of my people*. I will make *the exiled* a remnant, and *the scattered* a mighty nation. *The kingdom of the Lord shall be revealed* upon them on Mount Zion from now on and forever.”¹⁴

Micah 4:6-7 (NASB), “‘In that day,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will assemble the lame, and gather the outcasts, even those whom I have afflicted. I will make the lame a remnant, and the outcasts a strong nation, and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion from now on and forever.’”

Zech. Targum 14.9, “*And the kingdom of the Lord shall be revealed upon all the inhabitants of the earth; at that time they shall serve before the Lord with one accord, for his name is established in the world; there is none apart from him.*”¹⁵

Zech. 14:9 (NASB), “And the Lord will be king over all the earth; in that day the Lord will be the only one, and His name the only one.”

The phrase “kingdom of God” carries a double connotation in the targums. First, the kingdom of God is an active concept. It refers to *God acting in strength*.¹⁶ Whenever God, through mighty deeds, changes things in this world, the targum will gloss it as “kingdom of God.” In the targums, this especially occurs when battle is waged and wars are won through divine power. So,

¹³ Kevin J. Cathcart and R. P. Gordon, *The Targum of the Minor Prophets* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1989), italics corrected.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, italics corrected.

¹⁶ The closest arguments for this emphasis are found in the two works by Bruce Chilton: Bruce David Chilton, *God in Strength: Jesus’ Announcement of the Kingdom* (Freistadt: Plöchl, 1979) and Bruce Chilton, *The Glory of Israel: The Theology and Provenience of the Isaiah Targum* (JSOT Press, 1982).

despite the grammatical form, one should try to think “verb” rather than “noun” when hearing Jesus say “kingdom.”

Second, God’s kingdom awaits *revelation or unveiling*. In other words, it has existed since before the creation of the world but is not accessible to humans until God unveils it.¹⁷ The verb most often attached to the kingdom of God is “will be revealed” and, in the targums it is almost always future.¹⁸ In other words, *God will show himself* and his overarching sway whenever he finally acts with power. A person’s character becomes visible in his activity. Likewise, the Lord’s character will be disclosed through prodigious feats whenever he acts.

Jesus assumes and retains the kernel of both these connotations, but he also modifies them in important ways. For Jesus, the kingdom of God refers to God’s *activity* and God does make himself known thereby—it is a matter of revelation. However, Jesus also understands two key differences lost to the targums.

First, for Jesus the kingdom of God is here and now.¹⁹ In the targums, the revelation of the kingdom is almost exclusively future. Jesus also acknowledges more to come of God’s kingdom—how could it be otherwise given the dynamic meaning of God in action? But Jesus’ emphasis was on the close proximity of God’s work. God is doing something right where ordinary people live. His kingdom, which is from everlasting to everlasting, has moved into our neighborhoods. It is being revealed today. Jesus even pointed to his own compassionate works—healing and exorcism—as an indicator of God’s kingdom already active (Matt 12:28). This claim also gestures toward another key difference.

¹⁷ For the Second Temple idea of “revelation,” see e.g., 4Q427 fr. 7i.18ff; 1QpHab7.1–14, 11.1ff; IQS 1.9, 5.4–12. David Flusser, *Judaism of the Second Temple Period: Qumran and Apocalypticism*, vol. 1, trans. Azzan Yadin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 293ff, notes divergent views in Second Temple Judaism concerning inquiry into “mysteries.” For a solid overview of Second Temple and early Rabbinic notions of revelation, see Markus N. A. Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 7–126.

¹⁸ In each of the texts quoted, the verb *gly* appears in the *ithpeel* imperfect tense. The most natural translation into English would be in the future tense—“will be revealed.”

¹⁹ For an overview of 20th-century scholarly positions on the Kingdom as present, future, or “inaugurated,” see Wendell Lee Willis, *The Kingdom of God in 20th-Century Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987).

Second, Jesus redefines power. When God acts, a very different sort of effectiveness marks it.²⁰ Let it suffice to say that Jesus emphasizes God's character as gentle and humble (Matt 11:25–30), generous and merciful (Matt 5:44–45), forgiving (Matt 18:21–35), good (Matt 19:17; 20:1–16), and seeking the wellbeing of others (Matt 5:43–48). These also are the marks of God's activity in this world. God's power comes girt in a towel, not clad with battle armor. It wields washbasins rather than swords.

So Jesus' core message amounted to this claim: "God—the rightful king—is acting here and now to remake this world. Given God's character of compassion and love, his way of making things happen could easily be missed if you expect power as humans usually wield it."

The Existential Significance of "Kingdom" as God in Action

It might help us conceptualize God's kingdom if we consider that each of us also has a kingdom. We were created with a "dominion." Recall the creation account in Genesis:

"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. *And let them have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, *and have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen 1:26–28, ESV, emphasis added).

Human beings reflect God, according to Genesis, through exercising dominion. In fact, this theme runs from the beginning to the end of Scripture (see for example Psalm 8; Dan 7:13–14; Mark 2:23–28; Heb 2:5ff; 1 Cor 6:2–3; Rev 22:5). The background idea is that just as God exercises dominion

²⁰ To explore Jesus' understanding of power would require a devoted article. Since I am not offering that article now, I suggest that George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 52–65, would provide an accessible stimulus for one wishing to think in this direction.

over the heavenly court, so human beings in partnership with God are designed to exercise dominion over this part of the created order.²¹

However, this is not just an ancient metaphor. Nor is it something one ought to believe simply because it is in the Bible. Rather, dominion is a fundamental experience we have all had as persons.²²

Persons are created with dominion—a built-in impulse to make things happen as we see fit. This agency, aimed at the good, is so essential to human personality that we cannot imagine a person without it. Just try. Start by reflecting on yourself. Would *you* like to spend your whole life without having ever made any difference? Could you imagine anyone else really being a person if they had no impulse to effect things around them? When by catastrophic circumstance we find a human reduced to such a state, people talk about being reduced to a “vegetative” state. Dominion, or agency for the good, seems to be hardwired into human beings.

Perhaps we see this impulse in its most stark and unrefined form in little children.²³ When we are born, our dominion encompasses only our bodies—and that is more of a project than a possession. A little baby has not yet mastered her own body, but she pushes herself to gain dominion over it. So she always wants to do for herself. Sitting in her highchair, my infant daughter

²¹ For an introduction to the priestly worldview behind Genesis 1, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Sage, Priest, Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 101–14.

²² Notice the primal role of agency for the “life-world” in the phenomenological descriptions of Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970). This description of the “life-world” is also fruitfully developed in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002). For an adjacent approach, also emphasizing agency, see John MacMurray, *The Self as Agent* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957).

²³ Here I utilize an age-old philosophical strategy in service of biblical theology. Observation of infants and young children provides a clue to human nature as yet largely unshaped by social convention. For the ancient debate over what sort of human nature is seen in infancy, and the most influential Christian response, see Daniel Austin Napier, *En Route to the Confessions: The Roots and Development of Augustine’s Philosophical Anthropology* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), ch. 5, “Mirror of Fallen Nature.” This strategy continues to be utilized in various permutations and to very different ends through the modern period as found, for instance, in Rousseau, Freud, and Merleau-Ponty.

would grab the spoon and try feeding herself. Of course, since she lacked sufficient control the food ended up in all the wrong openings. Our scrapbooks contain some delightful, and now nostalgic, pictures of her first attempts at exercising dominion.

As she grew, this impulse to effect things expanded outward from her body. We would try to tie her shoes, but she insisted, “I do it!” She entered into her “terrible twos” and readily exercised those favorite kingdom words—“No!” and “Mine!” Both words highlight the built-in human need to affect the world around us.

Over time her dominion has expanded in concentric circles from her body outward. Now she makes things happen in the house and (when properly stimulated by rewards and punishments) in the backyard. She contributes to the world of a circle of friends, our local church, and her school. Lord willing, in time her dominion will enlarge to encompass cognitive mastery of deeper subject matters, responsible work, a family, neighbors, and more.

Dominion is not just something we read about in Genesis. It is something we see around us and personally feel moved to every day. However, despite being hardwired into us, not all dominion is used well.

The human problem may be described as a choice to use my dominion or agency disregarding God’s dominion. As a result, I also find my dominion not only set against God but also in hurtful competition with other’s dominion. The opening chapters of Genesis recount how as a race we chose to annex our little kingdoms from God’s great kingdom. Interpersonal blame and hostility, personal shame and exposure, and ultimately death followed from our choice to go it alone in this world. So Adam blames Eve. Cain kills Abel. Soon every thought of the human heart is “always evil all the time” (Gen. 6:5).

Human dominion simply does not function well apart from God. We were never designed to live—to make things happen—without any reference to God. It is built into the metaphor of “God’s *image*.” Try it out. Stand in front of a mirror and gesture. What does your image do? Images act in concert with their source, not independently. We were created to exercise agency for the good *in partnership with God*.

Jesus' good news is that God has a special place for each of us in his project. His great offer is to enable us to work with God. One may yield his or her little dominion to God's greater dominion. When I do so, I learn to do what God is doing. Jesus' preferred language for co-working with God is "entering into the kingdom of God" or the "kingdom of the heavens" (see Matt 5:20; 7:21; 18:1-4; 19:23-26 // Mark 10:23-25 // Luke 18:25; John 3:5).

Submissive Synergy: The Experiential Texture of Life in the Kingdom

Life in step with God's activity or kingdom possesses a distinctive experiential texture. In order to help his apprentices gauge whether they are aligning their dominion with God's activity, Jesus supplies thick descriptions of life in the kingdom through parables or comparisons. Consider a couple of examples from the Gospel of Mark.

In Mark 4:26-29, Jesus uses the image of a farmer to describe the experience of coordinating one's activity with an unseen power. This power is beyond one's control, yet reliable. Certain intrinsic challenges arise when working with an invisible, yet living, God. One is the question, how can I know if I'm doing it?

And Jesus was saying, "The kingdom of God is [gloss: When God is at work, it is] like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts and grows — how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

Here Jesus describes the kingdom of God—God's action—as like a man throwing seed on the ground. The farmer does not understand how the seed grows (4:27). He does, however, recognize how to time his interactions with those of the unseen power. So he does his initial part by throwing the seed. Then he sleeps. He waits as other factors work. When the harvest arrives, he acts again. Co-working with God requires timing our actions with his interventions in our world.

In Mark 4:30–32, Jesus expands on this experiential description. The emphasis in this comparison falls upon the incongruity between visible cause and effect.

And Jesus said, “How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is smaller than all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and forms large branches; so that the birds of the air can nest under its shade.”

The kingdom of God—God’s activity—is like sowing a mustard seed. What goes into the ground is the smallest of seeds. Yet, what emerges is the largest of the garden plants. When one works with God, there is a routine disproportion between one’s own talents, efforts, and resources, on the one hand, and the effect of one’s activity on the other.

The phrase Jesus uses in Mark 4:32, “the birds of the air can find shelter [or, take refuge] in its shade” uses a stock image from Israel’s literature. The “birds of the air” are the multitude of nations or “gentiles”—people very different from his hearers. By surveying the way this image is used within Jewish literature, we can appreciate the import of Jesus’ message.

In some of Israel’s texts, the birds fight against those who rightfully dwell under the tree (Mid. Psalm 104:12); in other stories they are simply driven off (Dan 4:12, 14; Ezek 31:6ff). The mutual hostility between Israel and the nations was well known.²⁴ Jesus’ disciples would have been ready for that sort of story about the birds. One could imagine a different parable in which the mustard tree grows up and the planter drives the birds away to protect his comfortable garden. Many in Jesus’ day would have expected that sort of story.

However, Jesus chooses to quote Psalm 104:12, which speaks of birds that are given shelter or take refuge in what the LORD provides (see also Ezek 17:23). To take refuge or find shelter is a known metaphor for conver-

²⁴ Manahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (2 vols.) (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1980) enables one to easily trace the relevant literary remains of this animosity in Greco-Roman literature beginning with Manetho in the 3rd century B.C. and reaching to Tacitus in the early 2nd century A.D.

sion in Second Temple literature (LXX Zech 2:11 and Joseph and Asenath 15.6).²⁵ It speaks of how one comes to be at home among God's people.

Here is Jesus' point: When one co-works with God, God restores his or her dominion. Our Father does things with us that we could never manage alone. The effect of our seed planting far outstrips our own talents. But God will also use us to help people whom we would not have targeted on our own. The disproportionate effect of his followers' labors will be for the benefit of the nations—not simply a special benefit for the individual worker.

Conclusion

My plea in this article coalesces with those of Stanglin and Shipp. Stanglin's article entreats Churches of Christ to attend to orthodox theological statements produced after the close of the epistles. This article, like Shipp's, suggests the riches we have missed by effectively excluding biblical material earlier than the epistles. We would like to see Jesus, and his Bible, taken seriously in Churches of Christ.

Moreover, pastoral reasons for incorporating Jesus' teaching may be particularly urgent in our day. The practical deism assumed by many Christians today—both in the Restoration movement and without—distinctly limits the possibilities for life as a disciple. We live in a world that largely assumes the truth of “naturalism”—the view that all reliable knowledge is, or eventually will be, exhausted by the “hard sciences”.²⁶ The “new Atheists” play off these

²⁵ For secondary discussions see, Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 146ff, more dubiously C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribner, 1961), 142–43, a concise discussion in Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), 163–64, Joachim Gnilka, *Jesus of Nazareth: Message and History* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997), 141–42, briefly N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 241, Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission*, (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 73–77. To put this concern for Gentile conversion within the larger context of Second Temple Jewish views, see John P. Dickson, *Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities: the Shape, Extent and Background of Early Christian Mission* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 1–89.

²⁶ One should note, however, that the popularity of this worldview continues despite, rather than because of, its philosophic merits. Among leading philosophers, even atheists such as Thomas Nagel now admit the intellectual bankruptcy of naturalism. See Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (New York: Oxford, 2012). For a strong argument from a premier Christian philosopher, see Dallas Willard, “Knowledge and Natural-

faulty assumptions in their rhetorical onslaughts. Surrounded by this worldview, our members need direct and accessible teaching that enables them to live interactively with God. While philosophical counter-arguments are important, nothing counters the naturalist worldview more effectively than lived experience of God as counter-example.²⁷ We dare not ignore Jesus' message in our day. It alone enables us to live in an interactive, co-working relation with God and thus find the significance for which we were created.

ism", in William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, *Naturalism: a critical analysis* (London: Routledge, 2000), 24–48. Of course, the philosophical critique of naturalism goes back to Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences*.

²⁷ For the role of experience in justifying belief, see William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); also David Bentley Hart. *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss*. (New Haven: Yale, 2013).

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