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## Re-Imagined: Participation in the Kingdom of God

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# Re-Imagined: Participation in the Kingdom of God

Joshua Love

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*The following is an introduction to the Allelon community written by Randy Harris, who serves as a mentor and friend to the people who live and work among the poorest of Abilene, Texas. —The General Editors*

***A**llelon is an intentional neo-monastic community living in Abilene's worst neighborhood. Josh Love is one of the four men and three women who form the core. They live there, not as a service project, but as friends and neighbors. The house is constantly full of people, often children. The core members have a joint bank account, don't allow personal possessive pronouns, share all things, do not have television or Internet, engage in communal prayer practices and live out the kingdom of God in amazing, joyful ways. —Randy Harris*

Our father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.  
Amen. (Matthew 6.9–13)

As is often the case, the keys to understanding a new missional imagination can be found in something very ancient. We have in Jesus' prayer everything we need to embody and receive the work of God in the world, but we must breathe deeply of the Spirit and ask God to transform our minds.

The task of renewal doesn't fall wholly on God, however. The renewal of God's people also requires courage of heart, and a hope that is pursued in faith, for there is a great temptation to walk by sight in this world. It is easy to build our hope upon human plans and with our human hands, for we all desire to see the glory of the Lord while we walk in the land of the living. It's not just evil that impedes God's work from being done, but also a worker of his kingdom plagued of impatience and good intentions. It's when we grasp and strive and plan that the kingdom eludes us. We try so hard at times to enter into its reign, so intently focused on not failing, that we miss what God was doing the whole time. Humans hate to fail.

But when all we do seems to fail, and a lingering sense of burnout comes calling from the unknown of a dark and confusing future, which hangs over so many pockets of American Christianity today, we must remember this: we do not serve an insufficient kingdom under an incompetent king, as if the kingdom of our Lord has no power. The question remains, "Why are we so tired and left wanting from traditional forms of church?" In all fairness, we are better now than ever in history at the Sunday morning worship, Wednesday night services and Saturday night Life Group models of participation in the kingdom. But even with the latest technology and the best of modern day seeker-sensitive worship services, the American culture still declares loud and clear: "That's not a Jesus that interests me."

As humans we still resemble the image of our maker, but is it possible that the church has lost some of its semblance to Christ? Perhaps we have fallen victim to the proverb of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “the one who loves his vision of community will destroy it.”<sup>1</sup> If that’s true, a better question for the American church may be this: what happens when our best attempts of inhabiting the promises of God flounder, not because God lacks power, but because we’ve lost his vision and traded it in for our own? Let’s start from the beginning and take a fresh look at the kingdom Christ has invited us to, and the very mission for which he was sent.

### **Luke 10: A Simple Message**

In a day and age where party lines determine whether one is a Christian, it’s no wonder that outsiders view Christianity as nothing more than a moral agenda or some kind of leftist politics rooted in social justice. Luke 10 and its parallel passage Matthew 10 recount Jesus’ own teaching on evangelism and his training for participation in the kingdom of God.

First, we often confuse evangelism for conversion. The first is a proclamation of Jesus’ message, and the second is a notion of imperialistic motive to spread boundaries. The two are not one and the same, but for our purposes here we shall focus on the first. Jesus’ message was simply this: “The kingdom of God has come near.” Almost any time the word gospel (good news) is mentioned in the Synoptics it is in reference to this very phrase.

### **Re-Imagined: Evangelism is the Proclamation of Christ’s Message**

This sort of “evangelism” is a far cry from what many people imagine. It has no semblance of preaching, convincing, arguing, or proofing in and of itself, and the instructions that follow it are even stranger in comparison to today’s popular ideas of Christian missions.

There is no intense training in Luke 10, no Bible study and certainly no fundraising for these missionary pairs. They are told almost the exact opposite of what we imagine: “Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road” (Luke 10.4).

They are told to leave behind all tokens of security and practical value, and later in verses 5–8 the disciples are even commanded to rely upon the provision of others as their vocational payment.

The goal of the entire enterprise isn’t even based on outcomes, as we might guess. Upon their return Jesus does not ask about number of baptisms or even how many households received the disciples. They are to pronounce peace to every house and to proclaim the good news, whether they are received or not. When rejected, Jesus instructs them to wipe the dust from their feet and move on. So what’s the purpose of missions if Christ isn’t concerned with outcome or success? The answer may be as simple as it is scandalous, and the Mathew account may hold some of the keys: “Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me.... [T]ruly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward” (Matthew 10.40–42).

Evangelism re-imagined puts a whole new meaning on “give us this day our daily bread.” It’s not just a request, but a commitment of participating in the kingdom of God. Finally, evangelism is never done without the actual work of Jesus, namely the work of peace and of healing.

### **Acts 10: Surprising Boundaries**

In a time of denominationalism, where getting scripture “right” is the goal of all, Acts 10 challenges us to rethink our notions of righteousness. Is being right all it’s cracked up to be? Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (Acts 10.34–35).

Just as Jesus’ training for missions and evangelism defies our expectations, so do the movements of his Spirit. The apostle Peter had it all figured out, until God told him to eat meat. This next lesson is that participation in the kingdom of God is always about crossing boundaries. Something new is always created when God and people work together in his kingdom, and we can expect to be surprised and protected, just like the Hebrews crossing the Red

<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper & Row Publishers, 1954).

Sea. Church culture today is far too dominated by an obsessive desire to remain righteous and morally sterile. As a consequence we often refuse to reach out to the people Christ came for.

### **Re-Imagined: The Righteousness of God is Manifested in Crossing Boundaries**

The righteousness of God makes clean the things of sin. God does not become unclean through our uncleanness. This is why Jesus was able to touch the leper and to befriend the sinner. God desires mercy over sacrifice, and values hospitality just as much as purity.

Participating in the kingdom can sometimes be scary because of this boundary crossing, and it can also be painful; painful like the grafting a tree into another tree, or painful like bearing a cross daily. We must trust in God that good things await us on the other side of these trials. For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross. For the gift of the promised land, Joshua followed God into battle against overwhelming odds. When Peter finally met with Cornelius, a new community was formed and both received new understandings of God and the ongoing gift of his mercy and life.

Kingdom boundaries re-imagined means “your kingdom come” is asking God to send us into surprising places and to encounter something new, as a foretaste of the new creation. “Your kingdom come” is asking God to surprise us. Okay, God we’re ready for some more!

### **Hebrews 11: The Kingdom of God Belongs to God**

Many of the twentieth-century church models look a lot like business models. We do risk assessments and form strategies to manage outcomes. It comes back to mission being about success rather than obedience. Hebrews 11 reminds us of the example of our forefathers and their model of participating in God’s work: faith. It’s understandable that humans like to know where they are going when they commit to something. Unfortunately the example set before us does not put this tendency at ease.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Hebrews 11.8–10)

The kingdom of God cannot be envisioned and constructed from human understanding. Rather, it must be pursued and sought after. A steering committee can’t just come up with a mission statement and expect to be working with God.

### **Re-Imagined: The Church Participates in God’s Designs for the Kingdom**

We fall into the role of pilgrim, just like Abraham. We are not lost, and neither are we wandering aimlessly. We are a people oriented toward a particular way of life and we set camp in the places of the world where God is at work. This is not Christendom; this is not a theocracy to which we belong. Our kingdom and our citizenship are not of this world—at least, not yet. For now we hold fast to the truth that

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. (Hebrews 13.11–14)

The city is yet to come and we can be sure that God is faithful to complete his work. Our role is to find where God is at work and join him there. The body of Christ re-imagined means that “on earth as it is in heaven” trusts God to be the architect of the kingdom. We confess that God will bring his kingdom to

completion. The kingdom is built from his blueprint, holy and separate from all human societies, cultures, forms of government, and aspirations. We are not wandering on earth without vocation. We are preparing for that day with eager anticipation, and spreading, in both word and deed, the good news of peace and the nearness of the kingdom of God.

Lord, we let go of all our aspirations knowing that he who tries to save his life will lose it. We know and believe that the one who loses his life for your sake will find it. All praise to God and Jesus the king of the world and prince of peace, to him be the glory and the power and the honor forever and ever. Yours is the kingdom. Amen.

If you are out of practice in locating the work of God in your context, or if you are just plain scared like me, here are some practices to give this new imagination of participation in the kingdom some wings to fly on:

- *Lectio divina* (holy reading): We spend a lot of time locating scripture. Isn't it time to let it locate you?
- Go outside the city gates: Locate an abandoned place, a place of shame, and join Jesus in his work. This could be a poor neighborhood or a segregated population in your city.
- Be interruptible: Jesus instructed us to be on guard. Specifically he was referencing his return, but when we simplify our lives we are also free to drop everything we have when an opportunity to participate in the kingdom comes. This can be as simple as taking a homeless man out to eat, rather than simply giving him your spare change. Don't have time for that? Be interruptible!

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