Contents

Preface ................................................................. 9
1. Down Is Up ....................................................... 15
2. Mountain Politics ............................................... 33
3. Temple Piety ..................................................... 56
4. Wilderness Bread ............................................... 71
5. Free Slaves ....................................................... 84
6. Luxurious Poverty ............................................ 99
7. Right-Side-Up Detours ....................................... 120
8. Impious Piety .................................................... 140
9. Lovable Enemies ............................................... 167
10. Inside Outsiders ............................................... 194
11. Low Is High ..................................................... 218
12. Successful Failures .......................................... 241

Discussion Questions ............................................ 257
Guide for Discussion Leaders ................................. 263
Notes ................................................................. 265
Select References ................................................ 281
Website Resources ............................................... 297
Scripture Index ..................................................... 299
General Index ...................................................... 305
The Author ......................................................... 311
The seed for this book sprouted one summer when I was teaching an adult Bible study. With two days notice, I found myself pinch-hitting for a teacher caught in an emergency. I had been reading John Howard Yoder’s, The Politics of Jesus and decided to take the class on a five-session tour of Luke’s gospel, which Yoder had used extensively. Midway through Luke’s story, a class member exclaimed with enthusiasm and exasperation, “Everything here is so upside down!” It was an unshakable image of God’s kingdom. That striking picture, which gave birth to the first edition of this book, has intrigued and stayed with me over the years.

I find myself drawn to Jesus and his upside-down kingdom again and again. His creative stories and powerful images keep pulling me back to the reign of God. Rereading the gospel stories in preparation for this twenty-fifth anniversary edition stirred my spirit once again, in ways only Jesus can. I write as a confessing Christian. A close encounter with the life of Jesus takes me to the heart of Christian faith and the very nature of God. For me, Jesus provides the clearest and the fullest disclosure of God’s will.

Although the earlier editions form its core and stretches of text remain unchanged, this third edition has been completely revised, line-by-line and word-by-word. Amid the changes and updates, the original argument remains intact: the kingdom of God announced by Jesus was a new order of things that looked upside-down in the midst of Palestinian culture in the first century. Moreover, the kingdom of God continues to have upside-down features as it breaks into diverse cultures around the world today. An abundance of scholarly studies of the social world of Jesus’ time have appeared since the first edition. This revision taps many of those rich resources.

Many things have changed since I wrote the first edition, but much remains the same. The organization of the material remains intact. I have revised the text word by word to enhance its clarity.
and flow. Recent scholarship on Jesus and the synoptic gospels provided new insights for updating some of the chapters. And while I have leaned heavily on the work of many scholars in preparing this edition, it remains a book for lay readers, not for scholars. Whenever possible I have dispensed with academic jargon, trying to tell the story accurately in a lively and creative style.

It is quite a challenge to shrink a big story into a short book. Many paragraphs could easily be expanded into full-length scholarly tomes. But that was not my aim. Quite the opposite, I tried to capture key ideas of the Jesus story and summarize them for students and lay readers. A trail of sources in the endnotes will aid those who want to pursue more in-depth study of particular topics.

There are many books on Jesus with many different spins on his story. The pages that follow show how I have spun the story. I say story because I have crafted the narrative in ways that reflect my interests as an Anabaptist Christian and as a sociologist. As you read this story, two key questions loom large. First, is this a fair reading of the story? If it is, then what do we do with Jesus and his upside-down kingdom? If in fact he points us toward God, how does the vision and message of the kingdom transform our lives for God’s honor and glory?

Sometimes it’s hard to see Jesus because he comes to us through the filters of twenty centuries of church history. Our images of him may come from storybooks, bumper stickers, or theological words we hardly understand. In many ways, Christians have domesticated Jesus, taming him to fit our culture and time. In retelling the story, I have tried to peel off some of the filters so we can see him more clearly in his own cultural setting. It’s of course impossible to reconstruct all the details, but when we remove some of the filters, we often discover a very different Jesus than the one who came to us in Sunday school. He may be a Jesus we never knew before.

The Jesus we find may startle us. He’s somewhat irreverent, certainly not a sweet shepherd walking beside the still waters. In fact, he’s not carrying any sheep and he stirs the political waters so much that he gets the Roman electric chair. But this is the Jesus who, according to the Gospels, discloses God’s will and nature for all time.
I write from an American perspective as a citizen of a superpower nation. In the global context, I am wealthy simply because I live in the United States and hold a professional job. The Jesus story may sound very different to someone who searches for food and shelter everyday. It will carry a different meaning for those serving an endless sentence for murder, drinking dirty water, dying with AIDS, or tortured because of their faith. I have tried to make the story accessible to all regardless of our social location or the burdens we carry, whether they be wealth or poverty, health or illness. Thanks be to God, the story is big enough and filled with grace enough for all of us regardless of our culture or condition.

I have resisted the temptation to make specific applications for several reasons. First, issues and events quickly become dated. Second, readers in local settings, under the guidance of God’s spirit, need to discern what the upside-down kingdom means for them in their own context. My task is to tell the story as carefully and creatively as possible, as Jesus did with the parables, letting the listeners apply the meaning to their own setting. Third, the kingdom of God will look quite different in different cultural settings. The issues for readers in a democratic nation will hardly match those of readers who suffer persecution under a brutal tyrant. For all of these reasons I have resisted the lure to spell out specific applications.

Throughout the text I have spoken of the Old Testament rather than of the Hebrew Bible, even though the latter tends to be the more common practice among many scholars. The books of Moses, the prophets, and other writings before Jesus are considered scripture by both Jewish and Christian communities. The two communities, however, interpret and use these same sacred writings quite differently. In one case they are interpreted in light of the Talmud and the ongoing Jewish tradition. Among Christians, these early writings set the stage for Jesus and the formation of the early church. I write as a Christian within this two-testament tradition and thus use the Old Testament label but do it with genuine respect for its central role in Jewish faith and practice.

My debts are heavy to the many friends and colleagues who have helped with this project over the years. I am especially grateful to those who have helped prepare this twenty-fifth anniversary
edition. I deeply appreciate the willingness of Herald Press to undertake the project. I have enjoyed the supportive enthusiasm of Levi Miller, Sarah Kehrberg, and other members of the Herald Press team. As he did for the second edition, Michael A. King’s editorial skills have given some of my clumsy phrases greater clarity and more poetic beauty. For the efforts and skills of these fine people I am greatly indebted.

Several colleagues—Christina Bucher at Elizabethtown College and Michael R. Cosby, J. E. McDermond, and John Stanley at Messiah College—provided wise counsel and helped me navigate the growing maze of New Testament studies. Anna Piacentini’s comments on an earlier draft helped to improve the text in many ways for which I am grateful. I have been blessed with good clerical assistants—Terri Hopkins at Messiah College and Sandy Metzler at Elizabethtown College—who key-stroked the changes and helped at every turn.

Kudos as well to the library staff at both colleges for their assistance in gathering sources. Linda Eberly kindly prepared the creative illustrations. I am especially pleased to have the art of my friend, Paul Grout, grace the front cover. He has captured the meaning of Jesus and the upside-down kingdom in a series of striking images of art. I am truly blessed to have the support and assistance of these kind and generous colleges.

Previous editions of this book have touched thousands of readers in different languages in many countries. Letters of affirmation have come from prisoners, pastors, professors, students, and others in many cultures. I am grateful that the earlier editions have helped to interpret the Jesus story and energize Christians around the world. I hope this edition continues to do likewise. Thanks be to God.

*Donald B. Kraybill*
*Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania*
*April 2003*
Down Is Up

Flat Mountains

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord,
    make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
    and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
    and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

—Luke 3:4-6

John the Baptist shouted these words of Isaiah to announce the advent of Jesus. The dramatic pictures portray a revolutionary new kingdom. Paving the way for Jesus, the Baptist describes four surprises of the coming kingdom: full valleys, flat mountains, straight curves, and level bumps. He expects radical shake-ups in the new kingdom. Old ways will shatter beyond recognition. John warns us that the new order, the upside-down kingdom, will transform social patterns but amid the ferment, all flesh will see the salvation of God.

In Mary’s song of exaltation, the Magnificat, Mary sings her hopes for the new kingdom. Along with the Baptist, she expects the Messiah to inaugurate an upside-down kingdom filled with surprises.

For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has put down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
—Luke 1:49-53, emphasis added

Five types of people are startled and surprised in Mary’s vision. Those at the top of the social pyramid—the proud, the rich, and the mighty—topple. Stripped of their thrones, they are scattered and sent away empty. Meanwhile the poor and hungry, at the bottom of the pyramid, take a surprising ride to the top. Mary sings words of hope and judgment. Hope for the lowly, as she describes herself, and judgment for those who trample the helpless.

A poor Galilean peasant girl, Mary expects the messianic kingdom to flip her social world upside down. The rich, mighty, and proud in Jerusalem will be banished. Poor farmers and shepherds in rural Galilee will be exalted and honored. For several centuries the Jewish people had been ruled by outsiders—pagan outsiders. Mary’s longing reflects the age-old Jewish yearning for a messiah who will usher in a new kingdom. She spoke for the masses who prayed for the day when the Messiah would expel the pagan invaders and establish the long-awaited kingdom.

**An Inverted Kingdom**

The central theme in the ministry and teaching of Jesus is the kingdom of God, or as Matthew calls it, the kingdom of heaven. This key idea ties his entire message together. The “kingdom of God” permeates Jesus’ ministry, giving it coherence and clarity. It is the undisputed core, the very essence, of his life and teaching.¹

What did Jesus mean when he announced the advent of the kingdom of God? His fellow Jews expected a political kingdom that would protect and preserve the Jewish faith. Over the centuries, scholars, theologians, and churches have developed different views. Debates on what Jesus meant have swirled down through the ages.

In the pages that follow, we’ll explore how the kingdom of God points to an inverted, upside-down way of life that challenges the prevailing social order. It certainly challenged the patterns in ancient Palestinian society and does the same in our world today. We can
capture the idea of inversion by thinking of two ladders side by side—one representing the kingdom of God, the other the kingdoms of this world. An inverted relationship between the ladders means that something highly valued on one ladder ranks near the bottom of the other. We find an inversion in the refrain of a Sunday school song when the rain and flood move in opposite directions:

The rains came down, and the flood came up,
The rains came down, and the flood came up.

Jesus does not portray the kingdom on the margins of society. He doesn’t plead for social avoidance or withdrawal. Nor does he assume that the kingdom and the world split neatly into separate realms. Kingdom action takes place in the world in the middle of the societal ballpark. But it’s a different game. Kingdom players follow special rules and heed another coach. Kingdom values challenge the taken-for-granted social ruts and sometimes run against the dominant cultural grain. But don’t misunderstand. Kingdom people are not sectarians protesting the larger society just for the sake of being different. Kingdom values, rooted in the deep Love and abiding Grace of God, seed news ways of thinking and living. Sometimes the new ways compliment prevailing practices; other times, they don’t. In short, kingdom patterns arise from God’s love, not a sectarian impulse to oppose or withdraw from the rest of society.

In addition to being upside down, the kingdom speaks with authority today. In other words, it’s more than relevant; it’s also normative. More than dusty ideas in the trash bins of history; the message of the kingdom addresses our issues today. Kingdom ethics, translated into our contemporary context, suggest how we “ought” to order our lives. We won’t, of course, find specific answers in the Scriptures for all of our ethical questions. The Gospels don’t provide cookbook solutions for every ethical dilemma. But they do raise the right questions. They focus important issues and suggest how we can transform our lives today.

**A Relational Kingdom**

What exactly is the kingdom of God? The term defies definition because it’s pregnant with many different meanings. This, in fact, is
its genius—this power to stimulate our imagination again and again.

In broad strokes, most biblical scholars agree that the “kingdom of God” means the dynamic rule or reign of God. The reign involves God’s intentions, authority, and ruling power. It doesn’t refer to a territory or a particular place. Nor is it static. It’s dynamic—always becoming, spreading, and growing. The kingdom points us not to the place of God but to God’s ruling activities. It is not a kingdom in heaven, but from heaven—one that thrives here and now. The kingdom appears whenever women and men submit their lives to God’s will.

It means more than God’s rule in the hearts of people—more than a mystical feeling. The very word kingdom implies a collective order beyond the experience of any one person. A kingdom in a literal sense means that a king rules over a group of people. Social policies shape the collective life of a kingdom. Agreements spell out the obligations citizens have to each other as well as to their king. The king’s ruling activity transforms the lives and relationships of his subjects. In the words of one scholar, “The kingdom is something people enter, not something that enters them. It is a state of affairs, not a state of mind.”

Kingdom living is fundamentally social. It involves membership, citizenship, loyalties, and identity. Citizenship in a kingdom entails relationships, policies, obligations, boundaries, and expectations. These dimensions of kingdom life supersede the whims of individual experience. Kingdom membership clarifies a citizen’s relationship to the king, to other citizens, and to other kingdoms. Living in a kingdom means sharing in its history and helping to shape its future.

Although a kingdom is a social order beyond any person, individuals do make choices about kingdoms. We embrace or reject them. We serve or mock them. We enter kingdoms and leave them. We pledge our allegiance to them and turn our backs on them.

The distinction between an aggregate and a collectivity helps to clarify the kingdom idea. An aggregate is a collection of people who happen to be together in time and space. Consider for example, a cluster of persons waiting for the “Walk” light at an intersection.
Though standing side by side, they usually don’t interact with each other. They don’t influence one another.

In contrast, the executive committee of a local school board is a collectivity—an interdependent cluster of people. They influence each other, formulate common goals, and together decide how to reach them. A kingdom’s subjects have a collective interdependence based on the policies of their king.

The kingdom of God is a collectivity—a network of persons who have yielded their hearts and relationships to the reign of God. The kingdom is actualized when God rules in hearts and social relationships. Kingdom life is more than a series of individualized email connections linking the King to each subject. The reign of God infuses the web of relationships, binding King and citizens together.

What does God’s reign look like? What is the shape of the royal policies? How can we translate the lofty idea of God’s reign into daily living? The answers lie in the incarnation. Jesus of Nazareth unveiled the secrets of God—the very nature of God’s kingdom. We begin to grasp the meaning of the kingdom as we study Jesus’ life and teachings because he was God’s final and definitive Word. Through Jesus’ person and ministry, God spoke in a universal language that everyone—regardless of culture, nation, or race—could understand. God’s intentions were not hidden in vague religious doctrines. With undeniable eloquence and clarity God spoke through the concrete acts of a person—Jesus of Nazareth.

The kingdom of God threads throughout the fabric of Jesus’ teaching and ministry. At the very beginning, Jesus announced the arrival of the kingdom. He frequently introduced parables as examples of the kingdom. His sermons on the Mount and Plain describe kingdom life. The Lord’s Prayer welcomes the advent of the kingdom. The vocabulary of the kingdom frequents Jesus’ lips. Indeed the centrality of the kingdom in Jesus’ teaching is one of the things on which scholars agree.

In addition to his words, Jesus’ acts teach us about the kingdom. The Galilean Jew provides the most concrete example—the most visible expression of God’s rule. His words and behavior offer the best clues to solving the riddle of the kingdom. Over the centuries,
Christians have used the words of Jesus to shape doctrine, often to the neglect of his ministry. Who he spoke with, what he did, where he walked, and how he handled critics offer clues to the nature of the kingdom. But in the final analysis it isn’t his kingdom, nor is it ours. Always and foremost Jesus points us to God’s kingdom.

**Why Upside Down?**

If Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God, perhaps we should dub it the right-side-up kingdom. Indeed, if the kingdom portrays God’s blueprint for our lives, then surely it merits a right-side-up tag. Nevertheless, I prefer the upside-down image for several reasons.

1. **Social life has vertical dimensions.** Society is not flat; it has a rugged topography. In social geography there are mountains, valleys, ruts, and plains. Some people stand on high social peaks while others mourn in the valleys. The social clout of individuals and groups varies greatly. The chairperson of a committee musters more power than the average committee member. Lawyers swing more prestige and influence than retail clerks. A central and persistent fact of social life is hierarchy—ranking people on vertical social ladders. We don’t play the “game” of social interaction on a level playing field. The upside-down image reminds us of this vertical dimension of social life.

2. **We forget to ask why things are the way they are.** The upside-down label encourages us to question the way things are. Children quickly learn common cultural values and take them for granted. They learn that cereal is the “right” breakfast food in North America. Socialization—learning the ways of our culture—shapes the assumptions by which we live. We take our way of life for granted. We assume the way things are is the way they ought to be. Eating cereal for breakfast, day after day, makes it seem unquestionably right. We internalize the values and norms paraded on screen and billboard as simply “the way life is.” If our economic system sets a minimum wage, we accept it as fair and just without a second thought. If someone trespasses on our property, we happily prosecute. After all, “that’s what the law provides for.” We charge an eight percent commission on a sales transaction because “that’s just the way it is.”
The values and norms of our society become so deeply ingrained in our minds that we find it difficult to imagine alternatives. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus presents the kingdom as a new order breaking in upon, and overturning, old ways, old values, old assumptions. If it does anything, the kingdom of God shatters the assumptions which govern our lives. As kingdom citizens we can’t assume that things are right just because “that’s the way they are.” The upside-down perspective focuses the points of difference between God’s kingdom and the kingdoms of the world.

(3) *The kingdom is full of surprises.* Again and again in parable, sermon, and act Jesus startles us. Things in the Gospels are often upside down. Good Guys turn out to be Bad Guys. Those we expect to receive rewards get spankings. Those who think they are headed for heaven land in hell. Things are reversed. Paradox, irony, and surprise permeate the teachings of Jesus. They flip our expectations upside down. The least are the greatest. The immoral receive forgiveness and blessing. Adults become like children. The religious miss the heavenly banquet. The pious receive curses—shattering our assumptions. Things aren’t the way we expect them to be. We’re baffled and perplexed. Amazed, we step back. Should we laugh or should we cry? Again and again, turning our expectations upside down, the kingdom surprises us.

**Detours Around Jesus**

Is it possible to step back in time and capture the meaning of the kingdom? Are we able to stretch a footbridge across the gulf that separates our world from the biblical one? Centuries of water swirl between the cliffs jutting from each shoreline. Two questions in particular make it difficult to build a bridge between our world and the one in ancient Palestine.

First, can we really grasp Jesus’ mission and message from our far-away perch? This question focuses on historical evidence and cultural difference. Do we have enough reliable information to paint an accurate picture of what Jesus said and did? Church leaders through the centuries have created many of our impressions of Jesus. Indeed, the church has focused on the theological meanings of the Christ of doctrine rather than on the ethical teachings of
Jesus the prophet. Is it possible for us to reach back into history and retrieve the message of Jesus?

But even if we can straddle the cultural worlds and gather enough evidence to understand what Jesus was about, does it make any difference? That in essence is the second question. Does Jesus have anything to say to us today—anything of relevance for how we ought to live in our world? Or do the vast differences between our two worlds render Jesus irrelevant? Simple at first blush, these thorny questions underscore the gulf between our world and the Palestinian world of Jesus.

Throughout this book, amid awareness of underlying complexities ever to be debated by scholars, I argue “yes” to both questions. Yes, we know enough about who Jesus was and what he said to unravel the mysteries of the kingdom. Moreover, as we unravel the cultural context of his life, the meaning of the upside-down kingdom comes into focus. Yes, Jesus has much to say to us today, not just about private spiritual things but about how we should live collectively. Jesus, in other words, is relevant. His message and his life speak to our setting in powerful ways today.

However, we may not want to hear what Jesus has to say. We may find his words uncomfortable. His parables may sound interesting at first, but they may also upset us as they sink into our minds. Unhappy with what we hear, we may search for detours around Jesus, detours that enable us to bypass the core of his message. At least five tempting detours make it possible to slip by Jesus. Over the centuries many people have used these cautions to bypass the kingdom message, dismissing its relevance for their lives.

**Detour One: Jesus Is Lost in History**

We can’t hear Jesus if we can’t find him. One challenge of New Testament studies involves sorting through many layers of text—layers of stories about Jesus and his message. Layers of archaeological evidence about boats, pots, and other artifacts sharpen our understanding of the cultural context. Sorting through the parallel layers of earth and text helps us discover Jesus.6

There are several reasons for all the layers. The gospel writers wrote their stories more than forty years after Jesus’ death. They
used oral stories handed down, as well as written fragments about Jesus that were floating around. In addition, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote different Gospels addressed to different audiences. Each writer put his own spin on the story to emphasize a particular point. Sometimes their stories match; other times they don’t. Moreover, its not always clear if some of the sayings come from Jesus, the editorial writers, or the confessional memories of the early church who by then claimed Jesus as their resurrected Savior.

These issues have stimulated many searches through ancient documents for the “real” Jesus of Galilee. In the end, we have in the words of one scholar, a Jesus with many faces. Matthew’s Jesus looks a bit different from Luke’s, and so on. Despite his many faces, we have firm evidence that Jesus was a Jewish prophet who lived in Palestine and was crucified. Moreover, most scholars agree that he preached the good news of the kingdom of God. He welcomed the despised, ate with sinners, preached love for enemies, criticized prevailing religious practices, and was such a threat to both Jewish leaders and Roman rulers that he was tortured on a cross until he bled to death.

Even though we cannot verify every story attributed to him or know the exact wording of each phrase he uttered, we have abundant, reliable evidence of the key themes of his message. Despite his different expressions, we can identify the broad contours of his face. There are of course many things about Jesus we don’t know and probably never will, but that is hardly reason enough to say we can’t find him. To say he is lost in history becomes an easy excuse to turn our backs on his message.

**Detour Two: Jesus Is Wrapped in Culture**

Even if we agree that we can find Jesus among the dusty layers of evidence, can we understand him? Isn’t he wrapped in an ancient culture that doesn’t make any sense today? We hear that Mary wrapped him in swaddling clothes, but what does that mean to us who rarely swaddle? This detour contends that the cultural differences between our world and his are so big that whatever he said will make little sense to us today.
Jesus lived in a small rural village centuries away from computers, the Internet, robots, satellites, nuclear weapons, and global corporations. According to this detour sign, kingdom ethics might work in small villages where Simon knows Martha—in simple folk societies where it’s possible to love enemies and forgive neighbors—but not today. Kingdom living might fit gentle shepherds and simple peasants, but not us. Jesus’ teaching, according to this detour, is trapped in a quaint rural culture, centuries away from the high-tech world of laser weapons and wireless communication. We surely can’t bring any insights, let alone ethical guidance, from his dusty old paths to our digital world today.

According to this caution, we can study the Scripture to learn about biblical ethics in New Testament times, but we shouldn’t drag them across the centuries and apply them to our lives. The gap is too big. This detour tells us to make our own Christian ethics from scratch. It tells us to ground them in common sense because the old biblical teachings don’t make sense in our complicated world—they’re simply irrelevant.

It is foolish, of course, to take words wrapped in an ancient culture and blindly apply them to our times. But thanks to the efforts of many scholars we have a stockpile of information about Jesus’ culture setting. With these resources, we can unpack a biblical text in its own cultural context and then transport its meaning across the bridge to our world. Knowing the cultural values, practices, and intergroup relations in the biblical setting helps us to unwrap the full meaning of a particular text. The biblical stories suddenly come alive in new ways when we interpret and understand them in their own cultural context.

Galilean peasant society was strikingly different from our world. Nevertheless, similar human habits persist on both sides of the historical chasm: nationalism, racism, injustice, greed, violence, abuse of power, and arrogant pride. In short, evil lurks within the social structures of both yesterday and today. As we unravel the meaning of the gospel in its own cultural setting it speaks to us in new and powerful ways.

The ancient setting of Jesus isn’t a handicap if we stop to understand its cultural context. When we do, the gospel stories swell with
meaning and power. Indeed, Jesus’ relevance would evaporate if his life had mysteriously floated above culture. He speaks powerfully to us precisely because he is wrapped in a particular culture. His cultural wrappings clarify, not hide, his Kingdom message.

**Detour Three: Jesus Goofed on the Timing**

The issue of the kingdom’s timing is a sticky problem in synoptic studies. It has provoked heated scholarly debates. When will the kingdom arrive? Has it already come, or do we still wait? Is the pie in the sky or is it already baked?

The third detour warns us that Jesus goofed by thinking the world would soon end. Thus everything he said must be taken with a grain of caution, if indeed he assumed the world was about to collapse. That didn’t happen and, so according to this detour sign, we can’t apply his end-of-the-world teachings to our situation.

This view tempers the radical character of Jesus’ life. Expecting the world to end in a few years, he offered temporary guidelines for living. They were applicable only to the brief interim between his life and the imminent arrival of the kingdom. If you expect the world to end and the kingdom to burst in at any moment, you can love your enemies and give away your cloak. According to this interpretation, Jesus’ “interim” teachings are irrelevant for enduring social relationships.

Some scholars think Jesus expected the final consummation of the kingdom during his own lifetime. In Matthew 10:23, for instance, Jesus tells those he is sending out that “truly, I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes.” In Luke 9:27, after discussing the disciple’s cross, Jesus says, “But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.” These and other passages suggest that Jesus expected the kingdom to come soon.

In contrast, other theologians argue that Jesus thought the kingdom was already present in his own ministry. Jesus said, “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Luke 10:9) and “The kingdom of God has come to you,” (Luke 11:20). Thus Jesus must have understood that the kingdom of God was already present in
his ministry. This line of interpretation stresses the presence of the kingdom in the incarnation and in the later growth of the church, but it may downplay a future consummation.10

A third position, the dispensational view, relegates the kingdom to a future and literal reign of Christ on earth. In this perspective, Israel rejected the offer of the kingdom at the first appearance of Christ. This snub forced God to delay the kingdom’s arrival until the return of Christ. The futuristic bent of this view dilutes any serious interest in applying the teachings of Jesus to our lives today. Interestingly, both the “interim” and the “dispensational” views reach the same conclusion: kingdom ethics taught by Jesus are meaningless today.

Many scholars stake out a fourth position. They argue that the kingdom of God in Jesus’ teachings integrates both present and future. A growing consensus sees Jesus, “speaking of the kingdom as both present and future.”11 There are at least four meanings of the kingdom in the Gospels. (1) An abstract meaning of the reign or rule of God. (2) A future kingdom into which the righteous will enter. (3) A reality that is already present on earth. (4) A realm which persons are entering or turning their backs on now. All four of these views provide us windows for understanding the kingdom.

The kingdom of God is a symbol filled with many meanings. The difference between a general symbol and a specific one helps to clarify the mystery.12 Symbols point us to something beyond themselves. The written word “dog” is a symbol. As we read the word it reminds us of a certain kind of animal. A specific symbol refers us to one specific thing. A black, female cocker spaniel puppy, for example, points us to a very specific kind of dog. In contrast, a general symbol has multiple meanings. The word animal, for example, suggests many kinds of creatures.

The kingdom of God is a general symbol, not a specific one. If we view the kingdom as a specific symbol, it limits us to one meaning. If the kingdom is merely a single event, we’re forced to ask whether or not the event has occurred—yes or no. A general symbol is elastic. It stretches forward and backward, wide and far, with many meanings. Thus instead of asking questions about time, we ask what the kingdom evokes or represents. For what does it stand?
Toward what does it point us? Furthermore, a general symbol isn’t tied to one event. The kingdom is more than an ancient or a future event. Envisioning the kingdom as a general symbol enables us to appreciate both its complexity and power.

Consider the phrase, “It’s going to rain.” Depending on the context, it means many things. On the lips of someone who just felt a few drops, it means it’s already raining. Someone scanning an evening sky may predict tomorrow’s weather with the phrase. A meteorologist might use the words in a long-range forecast. The same phrase will sound very different amid two weeks of torrential rains, a six-month drought, or in a desert for that matter. And so it is with the timing of the kingdom.

One scholar notes that the meaning of the kingdom on Jesus’ lips did not concern place or time, but power. Who rules and how one should rule. Our study embraces the kingdom’s diverse meanings: The Hebrew hope for it. Its inauguration in the ministry of Jesus. Its power at Pentecost. Its durability in the lives of believers throughout the centuries. And its final future consummation.

Kingdom signs burst forth whenever persons submit their wills and relationships to the way of God. To quote the title of a book, the kingdom is The Presence of the Future among us already. The kingdom of God is present today as God’s Spirit rules in the lives of believers. Members of the kingdom, even now, are those who obey the Lord of the kingdom. Those who follow in the way of Jesus are already part of the kingdom movement. Jesus didn’t goof on the timing; he was simply talking about something bigger than our human understandings of time.

**Detour Four: Jesus Only Spoke of Spiritual Things**

A fourth detour often softens Jesus’ teachings by spiritualizing them. Human communities sort words into boxes. We contrast good and evil, sacred and secular and so forth. In religious circles the term spiritual tops the sacred ladder, but the word social slips to the bottom.

Spiritual realities, the logic goes, come from God. They are holy. Social realities, on the other hand, come from people. Being
far from God’s heart, social realities are suspect. In short, spiritual is better than social, in fact, the two realities belong in separate worlds. For example, we may worry that a church activity will become “just a social event”—implying it would have no spiritual meaning. This unfortunate split between spiritual and social often detours us around kingdom ethics.

Spiritual realities do involve great mysterious truths. They include our beliefs about God, salvation, and the mysterious working of God’s Spirit. Social realities, on the other hand, point us to mundane concerns—houses, friends, salary, recreation, and our need for love, creativity, and happy relationships.

A false split between spiritual and social leads to a warped reading of the Scripture. It tempts us to turn Jesus’ message into sweet, spiritualized syrup. Such a twist can dilute the truth, making it harmless. We marvel at the atoning death of Jesus but forget that it came about because he demonstrated a new way of living.

In fact any gospel without feet isn’t gospel. God’s love for the world produced social action. God didn’t just sit in a great theological rocking chair and muse about loving the world. God acted. God entered social affairs—in human form. Through Jesus, God lived in a real social environment. Jesus in essence disclosed God’s social habits. In the incarnation, the spiritual became social.

To put it another way, the incarnation communicated God’s spiritual mysteries to us in a practical social form—in a person. Word and deed blended into a single reality in Emanuel (God with us). God spoke to us not through Greek or English but through a Son—a social event (Heb. 1:2). The genius of the incarnation is that spiritual and social worlds intersect in Jesus Christ. To separate them is to deny the incarnation. Social and spiritual are inextricably woven together in the Jesus story.

One scholar argues that repentance “is a purely religious ethical act . . . an act involving only oneself and God and is neutral regarding other human beings and the world.” This view mistakenly assumes that repentance is only a personal spiritual experience without social implications. Such a cleavage misrepresents the gospel.

We don’t have two gospels. We don’t have a spiritual and a social gospel, a salvation and a social justice gospel. Instead, we
have a single, integrated gospel of the kingdom. This gospel fuses social and spiritual realities into one. Jesus binds the spiritual and social into an inseparable whole.

On the one hand he says that true faith is anchored in the heart—not in tithing, sacrifice, cleansing, and other external rituals. In this sense he spiritualizes religious faith. On the other hand, Jesus argues that faith in God is always expressed in tangible acts of love for the neighbor. He was, in short, smashing our categories of social and spiritual. In Jesus’ view they’re a seamless fabric that can’t be torn in two.

A pastor once spiritualized the story of Zacchaeus. After telling the tale, he reminded the congregation that if we are spiritually “treed” we can by Jesus be freed. The sermon overlooked the profound economic dimensions of the story. It trivialized a social earthquake with trite spiritual applications. In the text we discover a greedy tax collector who meets Jesus, repents, and corrects his economic wrongs. Spiritual repentance and social retribution form one story, a story Jesus calls a “visit by salvation.”

To ferret out the social implications of the gospel isn’t to depreciate or neglect spiritual insights. It simply means that spiritual insights always have social implications. The integration of social and spiritual into a whole affirms an incarnation that moved beyond the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple to the social realities of Palestinian society. When we spiritualize biblical texts, we evaporate their power and practical meaning.

**Detour Five: Jesus Only Addressed Personal Morality**

The next barricade suggests that the kingdom only speaks to our personal character. In other words, the teachings of Jesus provide good counsel for our private lives but not for social ethics. One scholar contends that Jesus primarily desires righteous character. Conduct, he notes, should be a manifestation of such righteous character. But he mistakenly concludes “that there is little explicit teaching on social ethics in the Gospels.”

Such views strike a cleavage between our personal conduct and our life in community. The distinction between personal and social
ethics is tidy, but problematic. It implies that personal actions do not have social consequences. And it assumes that individuals operate in a social vacuum, detached from social forces. Moreover, it makes it easy to focus on our personal behavior while being blind to the social implications of our conduct. Most importantly, it declares Jesus irrelevant for social policy and restricts his authority to personal morality.

Jesus, according to this view, was concerned with the private matters of the inner life. He cared primarily about character, attitudes, motives, emotions, and personality traits. Hence the ethics of Jesus apply only to our inner feelings and private behavior. Jesus transforms our emotional outlook—our sense of hope and inner peace, but not our social relations.

The problem with such a personal/social split is that most behavior is social. Are any actions purely “personal”? Perhaps scratching one’s leg would pass the test. But even this creates problems, because the proper way to scratch a leg is learned in a social context. Cultural norms determine the time and method of scratching. Woe to national leaders who scratch their legs with heavy strokes during a press conference!

Our ideas, values, and character traits have social origins. They don’t just fall from the sky. We acquire them through a variety of social influences—discussions with friends, reading books, listening to music, watching television, observing parents. This doesn’t mean that we lack originality. Nor does it mean we are culturally programmed robots. Our minds are the crucible where a variety of influences are processed together. And each person, of course, blends these social influences in his or her own beautiful way.

Not only do inner feelings and motives have social roots, they have social ramifications. Feelings of despair affect how we treat others. Jesus pinpointed how even private attitudes impact other persons. Hating someone in your heart, he said, is equivalent to murder; sexual lust is tantamount to adultery.

Inner feelings and emotions aren’t sealed off from other people. They emerge out of social experience and shape our actions toward others. It’s difficult to think of any so-called character traits outside of a social context. Someone stranded on a desert island might
ponder the meaning of integrity, honesty, and meekness but would find them hollow words apart from other people. If Jesus had cared only about internal character, he could have spent all his time in a wilderness retreat lecturing on the virtues of inner harmony.

The fact that ideas have social origins and consequences doesn’t negate the role of the Holy Spirit. God created us as social beings and God’s Spirit stirs us to care for others. Just because our thoughts are social products with social implications, doesn’t mean our inner life is unimportant—just the opposite. Thoughts do influence behavior. Jesus stressed the need for genuine internal righteousness in contrast to hypocritical ritual. He knew that the inner life yields social fruit—of one kind or another.

Kingdom ethics, taught and lived by Jesus, can be transported over the bridge linking the first century with our own. This book resists the notion that Jesus should return to his own time because, in the words of one scholar, “He does not provide a valid ethic for today.” By contrast, the following pages echo the growing interest of many scholars who tie social ethics to Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God.

The Gospels don’t offer a full-blown system of formal ethics for every conceivable situation. And I certainly don’t espouse a sentimentalist mentality of simply “walking in his footsteps.” But I do contend that the Gospels provide us with episodes, pictures, and stories, rife with ethical insights that address our situation, however far we stand removed from the shepherds of ancient Palestine. The many pictures of the good and the right in the kingdom stories aren’t impossible possibilities or romanticized ideals. They may be old, but they still intersect in lively ways with the knotty problems of human existence today.

The kingdom vision outlined in the Gospels doesn’t spell out a specific program for social ethics or political action. The vision of Jesus does, however, clearly introduce us to basic principles of the right and the good for the collective life of the kingdom. Making specific applications, of course, is the task of believers guided by the Holy Spirit.

These five detours lure us around the teachings of Jesus. They offer excuses for shrugging off the claims of the gospel on our lives.
But such bypasses are not fair to us or to Jesus. We first need to hear his story before we decide how to respond.

The remarkable thing about our attempts to understand the kingdom is the way we dice it into categories. Our questions easily fragment it into bits and pieces. Is the kingdom present or future, we ask. Personal or social? Abstract or concrete? Earthly or heavenly? Spiritual or political? A gift from God or enacted by us?

Our human propensity to pull the kingdom apart into logical categories shreds its integrity. Indeed the kingdom of God in its fullness shatters our puny human categories. It’s not an either/or, a yes/no. It’s all the above—both/and. It is indeed God’s kingdom, not ours!

We want to understand it, examine it, and analyze it. But God enjoins us to enter it. God calls us to turn our backs on the kingdoms of this world and embrace an upside-down world. Underlying all Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom is a call to respond. He invites us not to study but to join; not to dissect but to enter. What will we do with it? How will we respond?