



# ***The Upside-Down Kingdom***


*Anniversary Edition*

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*Excerpts From The Author's Preface*


In *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, I have accented the provocative and perplexing upside-downness of the life and teaching of Jesus. My slant reflects my interest as a sociologist and an Anabaptist Christian.

Consider these questions as you read. First, is it a fair interpretation of the Jesus story? If it is, then what do we do with Jesus and his upside-down kingdom? What does it mean to follow Jesus in daily life in our world? That question of discipleship faces all of us as we ponder his message and example. Sometimes it's hard to see Jesus clearly because he comes to us through the dusty filters of twenty-one centuries of church history.




Our images of him are also shaped by storybooks, songs, bumper stickers, and theological words we hardly understand. In many ways, we have domesticated Jesus, taming him to fit our culture and time. In retelling the story, I sought to remove some of the filters so we can see him more clearly in his own cultural setting. As we remove the filters, we discover a very different Jesus than the one who came to us in storybooks and songs.

The Jesus we find may startle us. He's somewhat irreverent, certainly not a sweet shepherd walking beside still waters. He rarely carries any sheep. But he does stir the political waters—he stirs them so much that he dies on the Roman equivalent of the electric chair. Yet this is the Jesus who, according to the Gospels, discloses God's will and nature for all time.



I write as a white man who has had professional jobs and as a citizen of a superpower nation. In the global context, I am wealthy simply because I live in the United States. The Jesus story will sound quite different to someone who searches for food in dumpsters or without access to health care. It will carry a different meaning for those who are in prison, or being deported, or fleeing the ravages of war, or feeling the pangs of torture for their faith.

The Jesus story speaks to all of us regardless of our social location or the burdens we bear—whether wealth or poverty, health or illness, privilege or stigma. Thanks be to God that the gospel story is big enough and packed with ample grace for all of us regardless of our culture or condition.



I have resisted the temptation to offer suggestions for how to live an upside-down life for several reasons. First, issues and events quickly become dated. Second, under the guidance of God's Spirit, we need to discern what it means to follow an upside-down Jesus in our own context.


I have tried to tell the story clearly, and as Jesus did with the parables, to let listeners apply it to their local situation. Third, the kingdom of God will look quite different in diverse cultural settings. The issues for readers in nations that protect religious freedom do not match those who suffer religious persecution under tyrants. Fourth, as a relatively powerful person writing about the upside-down kingdom, I realize that how we follow the way of Jesus and practice its upside-down vision will vary a lot depending on our circumstances.





For all these reasons I have resisted the lure to spell out simple formulas or specific guidelines applicable to everyone everywhere.


We hold the responsibility to sort those implications out in our own personal, social, and national context. Throughout the text I refer to the Old Testament rather than to the Hebrew Bible, even though the latter is more commonly used by some scholars. The Books of Moses, the Prophets, and so on, are considered scripture by both Jewish and Christian communities. The two faith traditions, however, interpret and use the same sacred writings quite differently. As a Christian within this two-testament heritage, I use the Old Testament label, but I do it with genuine respect for its central role in both Jewish and Christian faith.



“The kingdom of God in Israel meant that which was fundamentally political as well as righteous, (as moral). When Israel dreamed of the coming kingdom of God, it was a time when the powers that were in control of the political, economic and social life that created so many circling series of embarrassment and torture and misery for Israel would be destroyed, and the political, social, economic, religious power of Israel would be restored. Israel regarded itself as not only a religion but a culture and a civilization as well.

But the kingdom of God in Jesus’ thought had to do with the quality of life under the rule and domination of God.”

Howard Thurman – *Sermons on The Parables*



“Jesus used the Aramaic phrase which was well established in Jewish usage, The “Malkuth of Heaven”. Malkuth, meaning “*kingship*” “*kingly rule*”, “*reign*” or “*sovereignty*.”

The expression, “the Malkuth of God” connotes the fact that God reigns as King.

The kingdom of God is the idea of God, and the term “*kingdom*” indicates that specific aspect, attribute of activity of God, in which He is revealed as King or sovereign Lord of His people or of the universe which He created.”

C. H. Dodd – *The Parables of The Kingdom*