KINGDOM
Conspiracy

Returning *to the* Radical Mission *of the* Local Church

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For Fitch

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Galatians 6:10

We do not need definite beliefs because their objects are necessarily true. We need them because they enable us to stand on steady spots from which the truth may be glimpsed.

Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*

In eternity this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets.

Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

Christianity is mostly a matter of politics—politics as defined by the gospel. The call to be part of the gospel is a joyful call to be adopted by an alien people, to join a countercultural phenomenon, a new polis called the church.

Whether they think of themselves as liberal or conservative, as ethically or politically left or right, American Christians have fallen into the bad habit of acting as if the church really does not matter as we go about trying to live like Christians.

Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, *Resident Aliens*

It is essential, in my view, to abandon altogether talk of "redeeming the culture," "advancing the kingdom," "building the kingdom," "transforming the world," "reclaiming the culture," "reforming the culture," and "changing the world." Christians need to leave such language behind them because it

carries too much weight. It implies conquest, take-over, or dominion, which in my view is precisely what God does not call us to pursue.

James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World*

These days I do not often meet Christians so passionate about evangelism that they question the need for doing justice. I am much more likely to meet Christians so passionate about justice that they question the need for evangelism. . . . In short, working for justice is cool. Proclaiming the gospel is not.

Andy Crouch, *Playing God*

"Thy kingdom come"—this is not the prayer of the pious soul of the individual who wants to flee the world, nor is it the prayer of the utopian and fanatic, the stubborn world reformer. Rather, this is the prayer only of the church-community of children of the Earth . . . who persevere together in the midst of the world, in its depths, in the daily life and subjugation of the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932–1933*

Writers are really people who write books not because they are poor, but because they are dissatisfied with the books which they could buy but do not like.

Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all people, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.†

The Book of Common Prayer

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Skinny Jeans Kingdom

Recently I was speaking at a pastors' conference when a pastor friend of mine cornered me in a back hallway and asked this question: "Scot, what *in the world* does 'kingdom' mean? The skinny-jeans guys on my staff are now all talking 'kingdom this' and 'kingdom that,' and I have no idea what they are talking about. To me, it sounds like nothing but social justice. But," he then quipped, "what do I know? They call me Mr. Pleated Pants!" Skinny Jeans versus Pleated Pants indeed. But this rise in kingdom talk can't be reduced to age differences; we are talking here about a break from how things were and are to a new way of being Christian. Kingdom theology is on the rise.

Skinny Jeans Kingdom People

Tim Suttle, a Skinny Jeans kind of pastor and leader of the alternative country rock band Satellite Soul, tells his story of moving from the spiritual gospel to the kingdom gospel.[1] What awakened Suttle from the simplicity and inadequacy of the spiritual gospel was the piercing discomfort of wondering if he was making any difference in the world because, as he believes, "we should be seeing the world changing all around us." Why? Because "the good news

can change the world." This difference-making and world-changing mission he sees at work in Jesus is time and time again called "kingdom" work in his book *An Evangelical Social Gospel?* As he puts it later in the book, "To profess true salvation . . . we must judge the authenticity of our conversion according to its social manifestations, not simply its inner, personal ones." Suttle illustrates the kind of break I'm talking about. But this break from how things were and are carries within it a potent undercurrent.

For one entire semester, owing to the recommendation of my friend J. R. Briggs, I listened to Derek Webb's haunting, edgy, politically critical song "A King and a Kingdom." The most haunting lines of his song come from the chorus: "My first allegiance," he declares, "is not to a flag, a country, or a man . . . [but] to a king and a kingdom."

Every time I listened to Webb's voice I wondered what he meant by "kingdom." The king was Jesus, the kingdom was . . . well, what is the kingdom in this song? And what about the church? Webb's song belongs to the Skinny Jeans crowd my pastor friend spoke of, and they all like the word "kingdom," and they all seem to know what it means, and as a whole they're a bit sketchy about the local church or the church as an institution. Which is what Derek Webb admitted in a recent interview when asked about an album called *She Must and Shall Go Free*.

> I wrote it after having spent 10 years prior to that in [the band] Caedmon's Call and playing in a lot of churches and in church culture—living in the church kind of world. At the end of my 10 years in that band, I found myself with a lot of questions about the Church and about the Church's role, my role in the Church, and the Church's role in culture. Do I have to go to church? Is that a part of Christianity? What role does the Church play, uniquely, in culture? So, my first record was trying to answer some of those questions.[2]

As he wrote "A King and a Kingdom" he was committed to the kingdom but not so sure about the church. But on his most recent album, *I Was Wrong, I'm Sorry & I Love You*, Webb apologizes for his posture toward the church, the bride of Christ. As Matt Connor, an expert on Webb's songs, puts it, "Webb, it seems, had to leave the church to love it. He's come back a better man for the journey. *I Was Wrong, I'm Sorry & I Love You* is a triumphant return [to the church]."[3]

Another pastor told me that on any weekend he wants he can solicit large buckets of money and lots of volunteers if he needs them for "kingdom work" and social activism, for compassion for the poor, for AIDS, and for building water wells in Africa. But, he said to me, "If I ask for money for evangelism, I'm lucky if anyone gives a dime!"

When I was at dinner with a group of pastors, one said this: "I talked with a young man in our church who had been on seven mission trips. Each 'mission' trip," the pastor said with some emphasis, "had *nothing* to do with telling people about Jesus or establishing a church or teaching the Bible, but with service projects like building medical facilities." I asked the pastor, "Did the young man use the word 'kingdom' for what he was doing?" The pastor responded, "Over and over." His last words haunted me that evening: "These young adults, God bless 'em, think 'kingdom' has nothing to do with 'church.'"

A missionary wrote this to me recently: "Religious work in Africa is very interesting. Almost no missionaries are doing Bible teaching, evangelism, discipleship, or church planting. We're all doing orphanages or trade schools or working with the deaf or HIV/AIDS education, etc. I'm puzzled as to why that is our reality." He didn't say it, but I suspect that those missionaries who are "doing" those good deeds think they are doing "kingdom work."

One of the most influential proponents of this Skinny Jeans view of the kingdom is Jim Wallis, and after he recently engaged in a public conversation about the gospel with Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, he offered his own summary of the evening. Mohler, Wallis said, reduces the gospel to atonement and personal redemption; Wallis expands the gospel to its full parameters. Wallis calls his gospel the "gospel of the kingdom." What does that mean? Here are his words:

> Thus, for me, "social justice" is integral to the meaning of the gospel—a holistic message that includes both personal salvation and social transformation. This is the gospel of the kingdom, not an atonement-only gospel. In the latter, it almost seems that Jesus wasted his first three years with all those teachings, parables, and healings. He might have just gone straight to the cross to make atonement for our sins.[4]

For Wallis, the kingdom is about social justice and social transformation flowing from personal redemption. Kingdom work, then, is about what is done for the common good—the theme of his 2013 book, *On God's Side*, an expression that comes from Abraham Lincoln. The subtitle shows the orientation of his gospel of the kingdom: *What Religion Forgets and Politics Hasn't Learned about Serving the Common Good*. We could extend this discussion for chapters and chapters, enlisting other voices, like Charles Marsh, who sees "God's beloved community" in the expansive ways that many today speak of as the kingdom;[5] or Walter Wink, who sees the kingdom as a world marked by justice and equity and peace and nonviolence and the end of domination and systemic injustices (the powers);[6] or even, and importantly, Tyler Wigg-Stevenson, who warns the Skinny Jeans activists that we do not build the kingdom (God does) and that the world is not ours to save[7]—but enough has been said to get the general drift.

It's time now to offer a summary definition of "kingdom" in the Skinny Jeans approach. What do these folks mean by "kingdom"?[8] After three decades of teaching about kingdom in the Bible and three decades of listening to the growing use of the word, I have come to this conclusion about this prevailing, and seemingly uncorrectable, Skinny Jeans usage:

Kingdom means
good deeds
done by good people (Christian or not)
in the public sector
for the common good.

Boiled down to its central elements, kingdom mission in the Skinny Jeans approach is working for social justice and peace, and the foundation for most of these efforts, besides the writings of folks like Bill McKibben or Wendell Berry, is a selection of life-giving and important texts from the Bible. One thinks of the marvelous concern for the poor in Deuteronomy; of the prophetic critique of exploitation, which is always a moral concern and never a theoretical economic theory and system;[9] of the relentlessly piercing words and practices of Jesus; and of the overall impact of a vision of justice and peace in the future kingdom. In Western liberal democracies—where

rights are assumed and protected or, when they are not, someone is at work to grant them—we are in constant need of reminding ourselves of the simplest narrative at work in the Bible: an oppressed and enslaved people, the children of Israel, were liberated through Passover from their oppressors (Egypt) and led by the hand of God through a desert and through water into the land where they were given instructions by God on how to live as a nation. Put baldly, this is a political narrative—a narrative of God granting an entire nation political freedom. Should that liberation narrative not shape how we work for the "common good"? Of course it should.

Some quick observations about this four-line definition of the word "kingdom": First, this gauzy definition of one of the Bible's strongest words is not what "kingdom" *ever* means in the Bible; the Bible never calls working for the common good "kingdom work." Second, this word's meaning matters because its meaning shapes what happens when we do kingdom "work" or kingdom "mission." I'll add a third: when people do kingdom "work" in accordance with this understanding of kingdom, they fail to do kingdom "mission." Sorry, but I have to add a fourth: there is a profound irony in how this crowd uses the term "kingdom." Statisticians are all telling us that Millennials are leaving the church, and it is usually observed that they are leaving the church because it has become too political. Agree? If you agree, listen to this: Millennials, who are shaping the Skinny Jeans vision of kingdom, have turned the kingdom message of Jesus into a politically shaped message. Perhaps we should ask if they are leaving churches not so much because the message is too political but because the politics are too conservative.

Hard, harsh words. So let me tell a story and ask a question, a question that will take the rest of this book to answer. But in the process—just in case you are a Skinny Jeans proponent and are now irritated with me—I will also contend that the Pleated Pants folks are no more accurate in their understanding of "kingdom."

Skinny Jeans and Jane Addams

I'm from Freeport, Illinois, and yes, the rumor is true: our high school's nickname was, is, and always will be the Pretzels. But forget this inane

nickname, because I want to talk about one of our (unathletic) heroes. I remember as a child that when someone mentioned Jane Addams, we all gave a collective but silent round of applause for one of our own, even if she did go off to "big city" Rockford for her college education and then disappear into the even bigger city—Chicago—for her life's calling.[10] What mattered to us was that Jane grew up in Cedarville, just a five-mile bike ride north of Freeport. Jane was the first American woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, which she received in 1931 for her determined and relentless advocacy of peace and justice for all people. Jane established a "settlement" home on the West Side of Chicago called the Hull House. Louise Knight, her biographer, sums up Jane's progressivist life in these words: "She worked to end child labor, support unions and workers' rights, protect free speech and civil rights, respect all cultures, achieve women's suffrage and women's freedom, and promote conditions that nurtured human potential and therefore, she believed, the spread of peace."

Jane's driving ambition was "to put the ideal of universal, democratic fellowship into action." That is, Jane Addams was able to perceive the implications of democracy and radically apply them to all dimensions of life—family, work, race, gender, labor, economics, education, international relations, and free speech. She had unconditional regard for all people, and she believed that the federal government had the power to make radical democracy happen. As with all advocates for social justice, Addams devoted her life to the oppressed, the ignored, the marginalized, and the silent. One of the more penetrating of her own insights was that *benevolence implied hierarchy*. Put more directly, benevolence was the action of wealthy white and privileged people toward those of lower social orders; as such, benevolence perpetuated the opposite of democracy. So Addams had to slay her participation in benevolence, and she instead strived for a more radical sense of equality.

What does this have to do with kingdom? To answer this, I want to probe Addams's faith. She grew up in the home of a very independent-minded Quaker-like Presbyterian father who never could sign off on a church creed since he believed in freedom of conscience, the lack of coercion, and a life of self-determination. Jane inherited that firm resolution from her father and only joined a church after college when she realized it fit her sense of social

justice and social Christianity as expressed in the social gospel. She repudiated Christian theologies of salvation, the importance of repentance from sin in order to be reconciled with God, the atoning work of Christ, and a traditional sense of heaven. For her the "real meaning of Christ's message was to trust one's own moral judgment, to listen to one's conscience," which she called the peace of Christ. She was a devoted follower of Leo Tolstoy's sense of nonresistance. What comes home to the reader of Jane Addams's life is that she *socialized* the moral vision of Jesus into a *sociopolitical platform designed to lead us to justice*, *peace*, *and equality*. For her the vision of Jesus was designed to reshape the world. An evangelical observer of Addams had this to say of her: "She seems to be a Christian without religion." And Jean Bethke Elshtain's important study of Addams has this to say of her faith: "There was religion at Hull-House, she would later tell critics. . . . The good news of the Incarnation and Resurrection had been siphoned off, and Addams had refilled the wineskin with a social message, an account of Christianity's origins that offered the poor what she thought they needed: a serviceable story that promised comfort for the time being, strength for the journey, and hope of social transformation in the here-and-now."[11]

What happens in Jane Addams happens constantly in those who turn to the political or cultural process in the world as their way of doing kingdom work. Christ becomes a symbol of a way of life, which for Addams was democracy; the ethic of Jesus is reduced to secular analogies, and in so doing everything central to Jesus—the cross, the resurrection, atonement, new birth, the church, or judgment—evaporates into happened-also-to-believe-or-not-believe tenets; and culture can be redeemed by the efforts of humans and the political process apart from, and even against, the Christian theology of salvation and new birth. Kingdom work becomes altogether the act of humans. Furthermore, the church plays absolutely no role except insofar as it supports Jane Addams's social activism. The location of God's work is in the *world*. In essence, the church gets replaced by Washington, DC, and the ethic of Jesus is translated into Western liberalism's noble ideals. Kingdom work, then, is when good people do good deeds in the public sector for the common good.[12]

These are some harsh words, but they are not meant to devalue the noble life of anyone who works hard for justice and peace in our world.[13] What

they are meant to do is to lay before us an example of indisputably good activism and to ask one question: Did Jane Addams do kingdom work? I believe many today would say yes, inasmuch as she was doing good, just, and peaceful work. I say no, however, and in the following pages I will show why, and we will see why getting clear what we mean by kingdom and kingdom mission makes a huge difference in what we devote ourselves to.

Skinny Jeans folks understand kingdom as social activism that is for the common good and accomplished in the public sector. Pleated Pants folks, in contrast, have reduced kingdom to "redemptive moments," which are sometimes seen in the inner heart, in healings of all sorts, and also in the public sector. But first let's see how the Pleated Pants folks explain themselves.