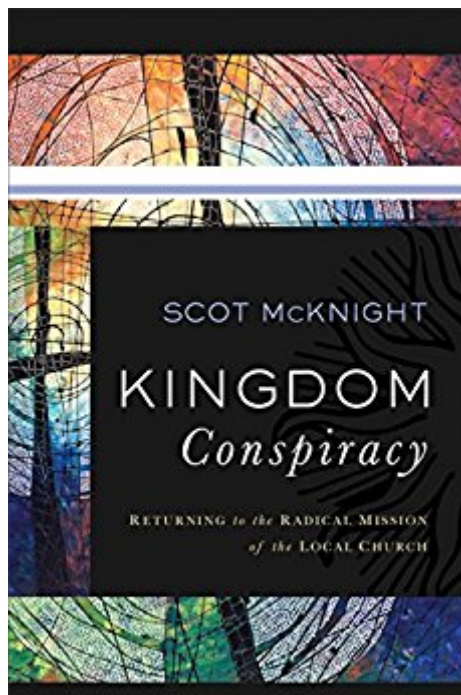




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# Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning To The Radical Mission Of The Local Church



## Synopsis

An Award-Winning Challenge to Popular Ideas of the Kingdom According to Scot McKnight, "kingdom" is the biblical term most misused by Christians today. It has taken on meanings that are completely at odds with what the Bible says and has become a buzzword for both social justice and redemption. In *Kingdom Conspiracy*, McKnight offers a sizzling biblical corrective and a fiercely radical vision for the role of the local church in the kingdom of God. Now in paper. Praise for *Kingdom Conspiracy* 2015 Outreach Resources of the Year Award Winner One of Leadership Journal's Best Books for Church Leaders in 2014 "This is a must-read for church leaders today."--Publishers Weekly "A timely resource for the missional church to reexamine some basic assumptions that impact church practice in the everyday."--Outreach

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## Customer Reviews

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read a lot of books and I write reviews for most of the books I read. Most of the books I read are kind of popular level books written for the general Christian population among us and they are thus not too deep or theologically hefty. Mostly they are boring. Every now and again I come across a book that radically alters the way I think about things or the way I believe or understand things. Sometimes a book utterly rebuilds the landscape. Kingdom Conspiracy is one such book. I say this without the slightest hint of hyperbole: this might be one of the most important and significant books written during my generation. That is how important this book is and that is why this book should be read by every Christian--pastor, preacher, and parishioner alike. I think the Pope should read this book--maybe he has. Seminary professors ought to read this book. In a world where words often mean nothing, it's important that we are also careful not to make words mean anything or everything. This, I think, is key to understanding McKnight's ideas in Kingdom Conspiracy. Not everyone who reads this book is going to wholly agree with all of his ideas of what the kingdom of God is (sometimes I thought the hair he was splitting was a little too fine) or his understanding of certain passages of Scripture. But one thing I think everyone can and should agree upon is that whatever we think of the kingdom of God we need to be very careful not to define it too loosely or casually. That is to say: not everything people label as 'kingdom' work is, in fact, kingdom work. (To put a finer point on it: merely calling something 'kingdom' work does not necessarily make it kingdom work or sacred and when we call something kingdom work, even if it is, it is not ours to bypass the church in the process.) Definitions matter as much as articulation. Thus his opening salvo: "Precision begins with defining terms" he writes quoting Marilyn McEntyre. Yes. It does. He goes on: "I lay down an observation that alters the landscape if we embrace it--namely, that we need to learn to tell the story that makes sense to Jesus. Not a story that we ask Jesus to fit into. No, we to find the story that Jesus himself and the apostles told" (22). Definitions and articulation matter. What I continue to see and hear--both from pulpits and in the books being published--is that we get it wrong on both marks most of the time. The Americanized gospel of 'join the club, go to church, and follow the rules so you can also go to heaven' is the result of unclear definitions and poor articulation. It's the result of thinking democracy=kingdom. That is decidedly not the kingdom articulated in the Scripture. Again, I see it in the books I read for review and in the sermons I hear and read. I am grateful for preachers like McKnight, N.T. Wright, and others who refuse to take shortcuts around the Bible to make a gospel that Jesus fits into. Frankly, I think if we asked a group of 100 Christians to articulate the Kingdom story, 99 would fail because it simply is not preached in the pulpits: "Until we can articulate the Bible's kingdom story, we can't do kingdom mission" (23). I agree. I was in his grip after 3 chapters and he never let go. What has most amazed me since I

started (and finished) the book is how aware I have become of kingdom language in the Bible. Don't get me wrong: I think McKnight nails it most of the time when it comes to understanding what Kingdom is and is not. My point is that as I read through the Bible--I am currently teaching through the book of Daniel--I am amazed at the language that is used: kings and kingdoms, kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven, and so on. It's all over the place. It's amazing and it is there from front to back, Genesis to Revelation, and all places in between. Maybe someday some fine theologian will do a comprehensive study of the Kingdom of God from the beginning to the end of the Bible. I think it would be a fascinating study. (I'm currently reading a book called *The Kingdom according to Luke and Acts* by Karl Allen Kuhn which is exploring Kingdom in a small part of the Bible, but he is also nicely tying that story in with the meta-narrative of the entire Bible.) I'd like to note what I think is probably the most significant aspect of the book for me insofar as giving readers something to practice. I belong to a generation of people who have by and large given up on the church. Let me be honest: I'm on the edge. I'm on the edge because of my experiences as a pastor with churches that have refused to move forward and who found that getting rid of me would make their lives easier. But I haven't given up entirely for two reasons. First, the church hasn't given up on me. If one church has gotten rid of me for their own convenience, another church has taken me in and bathed my wounds. I still love the church; the church still loves me. Second, because the McKnight solidified for me something I have already and always believed: the church and the kingdom are synonymous. Thus: "...kingdom mission is church mission and that kingdom mission is not working for the common good..." (115). Further, What I am not in favor of is assigning the word 'kingdom' to such actions [as public action or social justice or compassion for the poor or feeding the homeless] in order to render that action sacred or to justify that action as supernatural or to give one the sense that what she or he is doing is ultimately significant. When we assign the word 'kingdom' to good deeds in the public sector for the common good, we take a word that belongs in one place (the church) and apply it in another (the world). In so doing we run the risk of diminishing church at the expense of the world. (115, his emphasis.) And he's correct. For the Christian, the church should be a significant priority. "Kingdom is the realm of redemption and the redeemed, not what followers of Jesus did in the public sector" (114). Yes. His argument is, admittedly, complex and being able to draw that line in minds that are already persuaded is difficult. Nevertheless, we must indeed have our minds open and our hearts rent so that we can clearly define and articulate bible things. In the tradition I have belonged to for most of my life, this has been a part of our 'doctrine'--that we should call bible things by bible names. This is good. Now my tradition just needs to start defining Kingdom with more accuracy and clarity and then begin articulating it from the pulpits of our churches with

more frequency, more duration, and more intensity. I am glad that McKnight takes up for the church. I am guilty, but I get tired of people running down the church, the body of Christ, the Bride for whom Jesus died. So often people are so busy running the church down that we might think Christians can get along with it. We cannot. We need the church. All of us. Yet we struggle. "It is more glamorous to do social activism because building a local church is hard. It involves people who struggle with one another, it involves persuading others of the desires of your heart to help the homeless, it means caring for people where they are and not where you want them to be, it involves daily routines, and it only rarely leads to the highs of 'short-term mission' experiences. But local church is what Jesus came to build, so the local church's mission shapes kingdom mission" (97). We can do better. We need the church. We need one another. McKnight helped stoke the fires of affection in me for the church again. Maybe I have been too critical; perhaps unfair. With a prophet's insight and conviction, McKnight confronted my own church angst and now restoration has begun in me. This book asks some difficult, soul-searching questions. It challenges time honored traditions concerning definitions. While I get the point of demarcating this book along lines of 'skinny-jeans Christians' and 'pleated-pants Christians', I think even McKnight would acknowledge there is a lot of room for frilly-dress and bonnet Christians, overalls Christians, sweat-pants Christians, polyester slacks and silk shirts Christians, and many more besides. In other words, his categories help us see the differences but all of us have this problem of definition. His clear point is this: be careful how you define words because your definition directly affects your articulation. I agree. The book is heavily researched and, as per usual, given that it is written for a popular audience, notes have been relegated to the end of the book. It is deeply exegetical and contextual--in other words, he doesn't proof-text his readers but thoughtfully engages in exegesis of large swaths of scripture to give context and clarity to his ideas. It contains a substantial subject index which will be helpful for preachers and teachers alike. Sadly, there are no references except what is found in the end notes so following up with his research might prove to be a bit of a chore. This is a book that will not disappoint the thoughtful reader--the person wholly engaged in trying to understand what Scripture says about a particular theological subject. I simply cannot say enough good about this book. Please read it. 5\*/5 You can read more of my reviews here at <http://specialeducationteacher.typepad.com/my-blog/> or by going to my blog:

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This is a fascinating book. I often found myself reacting to the author's conclusions about church and kingdom with "Well, of course, that's what the Bible is talking about." On reflection, though, I would realize I'd never actually made those connections before. I've always had a high view of

kingdom and a rather low view of church. I know my view of the church has been corrupted by all the petty politics and narrow-mindedness I've seen within it. This book has helped me grasp the importance of holding church and kingdom together. When the church becomes God's people as intended, kingdom breakthrough happens within the church and beyond its confines as well. I was particularly struck by the author's critique of those who contend CFRC

(Creation/Fall/Redemption/Consummation) is the Bible's meta-narrative. He proposes an ABA meta-narrative ("A" is God as king; "B" is David et al as king; "A" is then Jesus as God and king); CFRC thus serves as a story within the larger story. I like this, though I tend to agree with those who critique it as an attack on God's sovereignty and immutability. I think what the author describes is more an A B A/B scenario in which "A" is the story of God as the divine king, "B" is David et al as the human king (with disastrous results), and "A/B" is Jesus as the divine/human king in consummation of God's plan. The "B" section thus functions not as an experiment gone awry, but an essential element in God's plan. I'm still reflecting on the implications of this book for my life and ministry in and through the church. I don't think I can ask much more from a book than that.

Over the years, I have learned a lot from Scot McKnight. He has done a fine work on the Jewish context of Jesus in relation to the Second Temple Jewish period. I have always felt that a detailed understanding about the kingdom theme is imperative to healthy discipleship. I have also been in mission work to Jewish people for several years and know they mostly reject the claims of Jesus being the Jewish Messiah because of a different expectation of the kingdom of God. McKnight begins by differentiating between what he calls the "Skinny Jeans" versus "Pleated Pants" pastors and how they define the kingdom. He says: "For the skinny jeans crowd, kingdom mission 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 (4), Kindle version. Furthermore, McKnight says, "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" (5). Meanwhile the "Pleated Pants" pastors, which includes males and females, have produced shelves of books examining what the Bible teaches about kingdom. Listening to this crowd makes one wonder if they are ever looking at the same Bible! For the Pleated Pants crew, two theoretical questions have risen to the front of this three-century-old discussion: When does the kingdom

arrive? (9) McKnight then goes on to discuss how the kingdom is both present and future and the work of George Ladd (a monster theologian) who wrote extensively on the subject. I appreciated McKnight's comments about Ladd's personal struggles (his sins) while he tried to be a scholar. McKnight goes on to say: "Pleated Pants folks have delicate egos, so I want to put this issue about the timing of the kingdom into a theoretical epigram: to the degree that the kingdom has been inaugurated, it can be realized in our world today. The kingdom has invaded this world in and through redemption in Christ, and to the degree that the kingdom has been inaugurated, it can make us new people. The kingdom now is not the perfect kingdom of the not yet, and that means kingdom citizens are not yet perfect, not yet fully loving, not yet fully holy, not yet fully just, and not yet fully peaceful. But Jesus' redemptive lordship is at work in the now, so kingdom citizens are to reflect that lordship" (11). McKnight also correctly points out that "kingdom" means both rule and realm. He says: you can't have a realm without someone to rule it, and anyone who rules has to have a realm over which he or she rules, and it is unfair to the Bible to force us to choose (12). Given I have used the C.F.R.C. (Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation), acronym at times, I appreciated McKnight's critique of the problems with it. He says: "Questioning this age-old way of reading the Bible is like sticking my finger into your coffee to see if it is warm enough, but I shall because there are three significant problems with the C-F-R-C story: (1) it has taken over how people read the Bible because (2) it is a reading of the Bible that resonates with humans personally. Therefore, (3) it is a narrow or inadequate reading of the Bible. There's so much more. Those who read the Bible solely through the C-F-R-C plot have an annoying propensity to read Genesis 1 to get their C and their F in place, but then they skip all the way to Romans 3 or to the crucifixion scenes in the Gospels to get to the R. This skips 99.5 percent of the Old Testament. Some, too, tend to omit any serious discussion of Israel or church or the people of God as the locus of what God is doing in this world. Why? Because the focus of the C-F-R-C story is on personal salvation, it is also a focus on the salvation of the individual. By all means, the Bible tells the story of redemption, and each of us needs to be saved, and the C-F-R-C tells us how that happens. That's good. But when the Bible's story is reduced to the redemption story, we lose much of the story" (25). I agree 100% and this is why many Christians are closet Marcionites without even knowing it. McKnight rightly puts the kingdom theme back in the center of Israel. Hence, if you don't know the plan of Israel in the Bible, you won't understand the kingdom theme. McKnight goes on to appeal to

James Dunn's work about the messianic/kingdom expectations at the time of Jesus. Dunn says we must begin with the story context: "It will have to be the context of Israel's memory of its own monarchic past, of Jewish current experience under the kingship of others, and of the hopes of the faithful regarding God's kingship for the future." He begins with three simple observations and then drenches those three points in a powerful display of evidence from Judaism of the various nuances at work at the time of Jesus. His three simple observations are these: (1) God was King over all the earth (Ps. 103: 19); (2) only Israel acknowledges God's kingdom, and that means Israel's king (when they have one) is specially related to God the King; and (3) this universal kingship of God will someday, perhaps soon, expand over the whole earth. The integral features in the big story of Israel are these: "God is King, Israel is God's people and as such is God's kingdom, and God's kingdom will someday cover the globe. We can say the story has three nonnegotiables: the universal kingship of God, the covenant kingship of God with Israel, and a future universal rule. These three nonnegotiable beliefs in the Old Testament and in the shaping of Judaism's story are rarely alone and almost never this abstract or theoretical. Instead they flow into very timely and contextualized expressions, and it is here that Dunn advances our discussion. When those three ideas were at work in real ways with real people in real contexts, they wore all sorts of attire, and Dunn lists fourteen different ways this basic story was told in various contexts: Return from exile Hope for prosperity, healing, or paradise A Messiah The renewal of the covenant Building a new temple Return of YHWH to Zion Triumph over, destruction of, and sometimes inclusion of gentiles Inheriting and expanding the land A climactic period of tribulation Cosmic disturbances leading to a new creation Defeat of Satan Final judgment Resurrection Sheol/Hades morphing into a place of final retribution This list does not come from one Jewish source. Each of the themes has traces or footings in the Jewish Scriptures, the Old Testament. Each takes on either emphasis or de-emphasis depending on the author and circumstance. Each can be the entry through which the whole story of Israel can be told. It is not as if there are fourteen elements of the one story that we are called to tally up, making sure each gets represented in each retelling of Israel's future" (46). He then says: "When Jesus said, 'The kingdom of God has come near,' he made that announcement in the context of these other expressions. Yes, there's something new in his retelling of the story, but mark my words: when he talked about the kingdom drawing near, these are the sorts of ideas that flashed across the memory screen of the ordinary



Galilean (46) McKnight then goes onto why the story of Jesus was in competition with the following: The eschatological battle of God found in the Psalms of Solomon (God's Messiah goes to war); The Maccabean and Zealot (strategy of holy warfare), The Essene strategy of holy withdrawal, The Pharisee push for greater zeal for Torah observance, and The Sadducee strategy of realism by cooperating with Rome. He also discusses the various differences between liberation theology, the social Gospel, and how both the religious right and the religious left turn their political views and their desire for power and influence into idolatry. After all, how many Christians assume getting the right person in office is detrimental to God's plan for America? He says: "In the United States, both the Moral Majority (or the Christian Coalition) and the Christian progressives have succumbed to Constantine; that is, they are tempted to use the state's force (even if of the majority) to legalize the Bible's teachings and its arena to carry out their battles. I see three modes in the Constantinian Temptation: Ethicize: we ethicize the kingdom into justice and then turn justice into "social justice. We do the same with peace. Secularize: we secularize our deeply grounded ethic of love when it becomes tolerance; we secularize the cross when it becomes service; we do the same with resurrection when it slides into generalized hope. Politicize: we politicize the kingdom when we enter the political process in order to bring about the desired kingdom realities of Jesus and the Bible" (206). One quibble I did have is McKnight's take on Galatians 6:16. He says: "Once we begin with Israel as the beginning, the church naturally will be seen as the Israel of God" (Gal. 6: 16) (88) While there has been many interpretive challenges and differences of opinions on this text, he goes on to say: "Paul shatters many of our preconceptions when he refers to the gentile believers as "wild olive shoots grafted into the tree trunk called Israel (Rom. 11: 17-21). If some of the branches have been broken off, and you [gentiles], though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others [faithful Israelites] and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root [Israel] supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in. Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. The image is clear, and we need to embrace it if we want to understand what church means. Paul did not say that God chopped down the original tree trunk (Israel) and planted, nurtured, and

caused a new tree (church) to grow. Yet that is what so many Christians believe: they believe God has put paid to Israel and pushed them off the cliff. This makes God unfaithful. No, God's promises are not obliterated, nor are they forgotten: they are up front and central to how Paul understands the church. The unfaithful of Israel are clipped from the same tree trunk called Israel, and gentile believers are grafted onto that tree trunk called Israel. For this reason it is wise to see the church as "Israel Expanded" and not as "Israel Replaced." Those who are most sensitive to the Old Testament are also sensitive on this issue, and a good example is Christopher Wright:

"It is a totally false and misleading reading of the Bible to imagine that God had a Plan A (Israel), which failed, so he replaced that with Plan B (the Christian church). The Bible never talks of the replacement of Israel with the church, but rather of the expansion of Israel to include the Gentiles. Any reading of the apostle Paul reveals that Paul strives to incorporate gentiles into the people of God, into one unified fellowship. In places like Romans 11: 25 he calls God's plan to expand Israel with gentiles the "mystery" (89). I agree with this assessment. In the end, McKnight wants to put the kingdom mission back into the Church. But for McKnight, we need to have a clear understanding of what we mean when we say the word "kingdom," and how it was understood in its original context. He says: "Kingdom mission, then, is local church mission which includes, Evangelism Worship, Catechesis, wisdom Fellowship, love Edification, advocacy Discipleship, nurture Gifts, Spirit unleashed The only place kingdom work is and can be done is in and through the local church when disciples (kingdom citizens, church people) are doing kingdom mission" (208). McKnight rightly notes that nobody can actually say they are doing "kingdom work" if they don't know and profess King Jesus as Lord. He says: "In my years of talking about kingdom theology there is one question to which I go when I want to know where a person stands or when I want to get a student to think more articulately about where she or he stands on this kingdom issue. The question is this: Did Gandhi do kingdom work? For the Christ-transforming-culture approach the answer is on a spectrum from the ambivalent "Not really but kind of" to "No." Since his work is parallel to what God's church is called to do, since his work is good and just . . . for these reasons and plenty of others, Gandhi, though clearly not a Christian, in some sense did kingdom work for many in the transformation approach. In the liberation theology approach the answer is, "Yes, Gandhi's peace work was kingdom

work because Gandhi did God's will. Anyone establishing justice and peace is doing kingdom work regardless of their faith. I say, "No, only kingdom people do kingdom work, and since Gandhi is not a kingdom person he did not do kingdom work" (255). He also says: "We don't have an ethic for our Christian life and another ethic for our public, worldly, secular life. We have one ethic because Jesus is Lord over all. We confess Jesus is Lord, so when we are faced with an economic decision, we look to Jesus; when we are faced with a community decision, we look to Jesus; when we are faced with a family decision, we look to Jesus; when we are faced with an education decision, we look to Jesus; when we are faced with a global decision, we look to Jesus; and when we are faced with a political decision, we look to Jesus. We look to Jesus because Jesus is Lord." (103). Overall, I learned a lot from Kingdom Conspiracy. I had already read several books on the topic and have thought about this issue quite a bit. I think this book has plenty to offer and can take a disciple of Jesus from simply accepting Jesus as their Savior and truly make Him both King of their lives.

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