



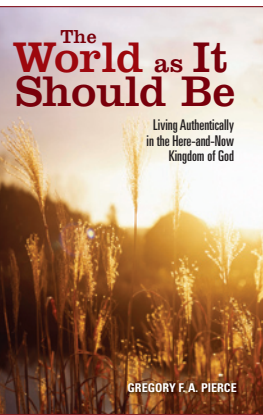
The World as It Should Be

Living Authentically
in the Here-and-Now
Kingdom of God

Discussion Guide

Because the divine goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, God produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting in one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another....Thus the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly and represents it better than any single creature whatever.

- Thomas Aquinas (CA. 1225-74)



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Welcome

Dear Friend,

It is a great honor that you are gathering to discuss “The World as It Should Be.”

I am convinced of two things:

1. Our troubled world needs a compelling vision of how humans can relate better to one another and to our planet.
2. We Christians have such a vision to offer. It is the vision of Jesus of Nazareth, who called his view of the way the world should be “the kingdom of God.”

I have tried to organize my book so that it lends itself to small-group discussion. Each chapter tries to explore one aspect of the kingdom of God, and then offers questions for reflection or discussion. This guide offers an opportunity for small-group discussion over the course of five sessions by dividing the book into five sections and offering additional questions for group reflection and discussion.

You may not agree with every aspect of my understanding of what Jesus had in mind for this world. In fact, I do not expect you will. If you know the history of Jesus’ followers, you know that we have always disagreed about how best to follow him. That does not mean, however, that we have to question the motives or orthodoxy of one another. Instead we need to respect, listen to, and learn from other Christians. What we are searching for is the truth, which Jesus promised would “set us free.”

The purpose of my book is to encourage gentle yet provocative reflection and discussion on how we human beings might all live more authentically in the here and now. Jesus’ “big idea” of how the world should be has something to offer all of us.

Peace,

Greg Pierce

Your Guide

There are five sessions in this guide, each with questions that focus on ideas and stories from chapters in the book. The questions are designed to help stimulate the open sharing of your own ideas, opinions, and stories.

At the beginning of each session is an Opening Scripture Reflection. These provide examples found throughout Scripture related to the concept of the kingdom of God. We acknowledge this in our opening reflection each time we gather.

At the end of each session is a section entitled “For Further Reflection.” This section invites you to take time to contemplate and reflect on an important theme or concept, taken from the content of the session’s reading, before the next gathering.

Meeting Format

You may want to use the format below when your discussion group meets. You may also want to adapt it for the needs of your group.

Gathering

The leader begins the meeting by lighting a candle and praying: “We begin in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We thank you, God, for bringing us together to discuss our role in bringing about your kingdom. May this discussion inspire us as we use our time and talents to further the mission of your Son, Jesus Christ.” The group then reflects on the Scripture passage.

Discussing

In session 1, the leader may first invite participants to introduce themselves and remind all that open, respectful, and nonjudgmental conversation is encouraged. The discussion continues with the questions. Questions are found at the end of each chapter as well as in this guide. You may wish to go through all of the questions or focus on those you feel are best suited to your group. In sessions 2 through 5, the leader may open by asking participants to share their reflections and actions since the last gathering.

Closing

The leader encourages participants to read the “For Further Reflection” section and to contemplate the actions they may take to help bring about the kingdom of God before the next session. All pray the Lord’s Prayer together, and the candle is extinguished.

Session 1:

Chapters 1–6: The Kingdom of God Was Jesus' Big Idea

Opening Scripture Reflection

Acts 1:3

After [Jesus'] death, he presented himself alive to them in many different settings over a period of forty days. In face-to-face meetings, he talked to them about things concerning the kingdom of God.

Discussion Questions for Chapters 1–3

1. Imagine that you are one of Jesus' disciples. You thought he would lead your people into a new era of freedom and justice; instead he was unjustly executed. But then, miraculously, he comes back—and he spends more than a month meeting with you and talking with you. What kinds of things would you expect him to say? What would you want to hear from him?
2. When Jesus talked so much about the kingdom of God, the people of his time and place would have thought of him as a ruler with ultimate power. What kind of power does Jesus have in the here and now, and how is it different from the typical power of a king or government leader?
3. Do you think of God as a king? If not, what image comes to mind when you think of God? When Jesus referred to the world as it should be as “the kingdom of God,” what do you think his experience of kings would have been?
4. What does this phrase mean to you: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”? When you pray these words, what are you hoping for?
5. A person who lives authentically is rooted in an honest assessment of the situation. How can faith in Jesus help us live more authentically?
6. Authenticity sometimes means that a person or thing cannot be mass-produced or reduced to a popular theme or simple idea. How does this relate to Jesus or the kingdom of God?

Discussion Questions for Chapters 4–6

7. In Luke 17:21, Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is among you.” What does that statement say about the kingdom in terms of time and place? How often have you thought of God's kingdom as existing only in the future? If the kingdom of God is here and now, what does that mean for us living in the here and now?
8. What do you think most people are waiting for, in terms of the world becoming a better place? Are they hoping for more money, different people in office, for wars to end?
9. How do you, personally, recognize the kingdom of God that is here right now, that has already begun? How do you respond when you see God at work in the world-as-it-is?

Session 1 continued

10. If the kingdom of God is already here, how do you think it becomes apparent to people? What hides the kingdom from people's awareness?
11. Jesus tells the story of two sons, one who said he would carry out his father's wishes but didn't follow through, and the other who said no but later changed his mind and did what their father had asked. What point was Jesus making with this story?
12. The kingdom of God is clearly about action in the world. For you, what gets in the way of your acting in order to help the world become what God wants it to be? What makes you hesitate to turn intentions or beliefs into actions?

For Further Reflection

Jesus rose from the dead and then spent forty days instructing the disciples about how to live the kingdom of God in their very imperfect world. Jesus is with you today, in your imperfect world. Set aside some time to be still and listen to what Jesus is saying to you about making the kingdom of God a reality in your situation. How can you minister to the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the hungry, the abandoned? What words of encouragement does Jesus have for anyone who desires a better life?

Session 2:

Chapters 7–12: The Kingdom of God is about Repentance, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation

Opening Scripture Reflection

John 8:7–11

[Jesus] said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” . . . When they heard it, they went away, one by one . . . Jesus said to her, “Woman where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

Discussion Questions for Chapters 7–9

1. Are you a hopeful person, or a skeptic? How does your belief in the kingdom of God influence your general attitude?
2. Jesus saw life “as a line of purposeful events going into the future.” Is this what you believe? Why, or why not?
3. Jesus talked a lot about fruitfulness. How would you define fruitfulness in the spiritual life?
4. In today’s culture, wealth is often the measure of someone’s success. If Christians adopt this artificial standard, what kind of harm might we do to others?
5. In a culture that often values all the wrong standards, how can Christians bring about the kingdom of God? How can we facilitate reconciliation for people who have been made outsiders because they did not measure up?
6. Do you believe that the world can ever truly be at peace? What would that look like? How could it be accomplished?

Discussion Questions for Chapters 10–12

7. If the kingdom of God is like a family, what does that say about the way you handle conflict with other people? Or the way you respond when others are in need? Or the way you respond when others are heading toward harm and trouble?
8. Western culture puts a high value on privacy, independence, and individuality. How can we reconcile these values with the reality of humanity as one community?
9. What are your honest reactions to the story of the adulterous woman? Which character do you most relate to, and why?
10. What arguments do you hear against forgiveness and pardon at the local, national, and international levels? When wrong is done in a community, what are people’s natural and immediate reactions?
11. If your church community were nonjudgmental, what would that look like? What would it look like in your family? In your workplace?

Session 2 continued

12. How would it be possible to create a world in which people differed but did not judge one another? How would such a world function? Would that be appealing to you? Why, or why not?

For Further Reflection

Try to identify the different kinds of judgment that exist in any life—for example, we use judgment when making any wise decision, but Jesus warned us against vindictive judgment of other people. How do you know when judgment is appropriate? When have you been judged wrongly, and what made that judgment wrong? When have you failed to make a judgment that should have been made, and what were the consequences? Ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom as you look at the opportunities for judgment in your life.

Session 3:

Chapters 13–18: The Kingdom of God Is an Imperative Verb

Opening Scripture Reflection

John 5:17, 19, *The Message*

But Jesus defended himself. “My Father is working straight through, even on the Sabbath. So am I.” . . . So Jesus explained himself at length. “I’m telling you this straight. The Son can’t independently do a thing, only what he sees the Father doing. What the Father does, the Son does.”

Discussion Questions for Chapters 13–15

1. Jesus often talked about the difference between simply believing what he said and actually doing what he said. In what areas of life do people tend to talk and generate ideas but not act? Why do you think we resist action, and how can we overcome our resistance?
2. If it requires our own work to bring about God’s kingdom, then how is grace involved? We see that Jesus worked all the time, yet the Scriptures say that he was able to do work through the power of the Holy Spirit. Is this how it is supposed to work for us—or, do we really believe the Holy Spirit works through our work?
3. Jesus used the word “blessed” to mean happy or joyful. What does blessed mean to you, and why? When are you joyful, and when do you feel a definite absence of joy?
4. Jesus saw joy as a necessary part of the kingdom of God. Why do you think joy should be so important, if we’re wanting to transform the world?
5. To you, what does social justice have to do with spiritual reality?
6. If Jesus has already saved and redeemed the world, then how do you explain that sin still exists in the world?

Discussion Questions for Chapters 16–18

7. Jesus refers various times to children—and always in positive ways. What characteristics of children do you think attracted him, and why?
8. How do you think saintliness is connected to being young-at-heart? Think about the saints in your own life: what qualities do they exhibit?
9. One imperative verb we might associate with the kingdom of God is “receive,” as in, “receive all sorts of people into the kingdom of God.” How have you been taught to view “others,” including those not calling themselves Christians?
10. Based on your own experience, how do people respond when they are treated as outsiders, as opposed to how they respond when they are treated as part of the family or favored group?
11. Another imperative verb in the kingdom of God is “follow,” meaning, “follow Jesus.” Why do some people choose not to follow him?

Session 3 continued

12. After the Resurrection, why do you think that Jesus appeared only to people who believed in him? When you consider all the ways he could have used his powers to convince people of his message, why do you think he left so much up to people's own choices?

For Further Reflection

Jesus was always at work, doing what he saw the Father doing. What does it mean to you to always be at work in the kingdom of God? Do you see some of your work more connected to God's kingdom than other work—and if so, what's the difference between kingdom work and other work? You might spend time praying for wisdom to see the work that God is already doing in the world—and for ways in which you can be part of that work.

Session 4:

Chapters 19–24: The Kingdom of God Is a Different Way of Seeing

Opening Scripture Reflection

Mark 4:11–12, The Message

You've been given insight into God's kingdom—you know how it works. But to those who can't see it yet, everything comes in stories, creating readiness, nudging them toward receptive insight.

These are people—

Whose eyes are open but don't see a thing,

Whose ears are open but don't understand a word,

Who avoid making an about-face and getting forgiven.

Discussion Questions for Chapters 19–21

1. Jesus made it clear that a person had to put the kingdom of God before everything else. What does this actually mean on a day-to-day basis?
2. What do you think is an accurate test of a person's priorities? When can you tell that your own priorities are changing?
3. Recall a time when you finally "saw" something clearly. What was the situation, and what impact did that ability to see have on your life?
4. What do we see easily in this world? What things are we often blind to? What does it take to open our eyes? Try to give examples.
5. What appeared to be more important to Jesus than justice? Why do you think people were often resistant to Jesus' radical generosity?
6. If the governments of the world operated as if there were abundant resources for everyone (remember God as the one hiring the workers), how might that change systems in the economy and elsewhere?

Discussion Questions for Chapters 22–24

7. Jesus used flawless arguments, and he performed miracles; certainly those two things should have been enough to convince anyone. Why do you think people still resisted Jesus, even after he had answered questions and proven his power through healings or feeding thousands of people?
8. Think of a time when you were manipulated or coerced in some other way to do something or go somewhere. Remember what you felt like. What was the ultimate result of that coercion?
9. How do you think the "law of love" might be threatening to people in authority? In what ways do you see those in authority resisting what Jesus conveyed as the law of love?
10. How would you describe the effects you've seen of love being demonstrated toward individuals or groups?

Session 4 continued

11. How is fear a way of seeing the world? Try to describe fear as a viewpoint.
12. If faith is a way of seeing, how might faith give a person the ability to live without fear? How has faith affected the way you see the difficulties and dangers of life?

For Further Reflection

Seeing the world differently from how we have always seen can be more difficult than breaking some obvious bad habit. In what areas of life are you the most blind? What aspect of the kingdom of God do you want to see more clearly—and how do you think that might happen?

Session 5:

Chapters 25–30: The Kingdom of God Is True

Opening Scripture Reflection

John 1:1, 14, The Message

The Word was God,
in readiness for God from day one. . . .
The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.

Discussion Questions for Chapters 25–27

1. Jesus did, indeed, move into the neighborhood—came to this world in a specific time and place. What were the advantages of Jesus being a human being and the product of a particular culture? What were the disadvantages?
2. What truths about God do you think Jesus demonstrated in the way he approached people of all kinds? What aspects of his treatment of others do you think surprised people, given their time, place, and culture?
3. Jesus freely offered the good news of God’s love; yet he required that people not simply receive the good news but live out of this new knowledge. Would you say that he made the kingdom of God easy or difficult, and why?
4. Why in the world would God make us partners in the kingdom? Why not simply make us recipients? Why do you think Jesus entrusted so much to disciples who, frankly, made many mistakes and didn’t have much faith?
5. What has it cost you to live out your Christian calling in the kingdom of God?
6. On the other hand, what are the costs—economic and social—of *not* giving yourself to the kingdom of God? How would you compare the world-as-it-should-be with the world-as-it-is?

Discussion Questions for Chapters 28–30

7. What is your vision of the world-as-it-should-be? How does it compare to the world-as-it-is? What do you see as the personal payoff of following Jesus in the here-and-now kingdom of God?
8. Do you consider the kingdom of God as one of your gifts to the world? How, in a typical day’s routine, can you demonstrate to others the possibilities—the payoffs—of being part of this kingdom?
9. If you felt that you had all the time in the world to achieve certain goals or make specific changes, how would that affect your approach to those goals and changes?
10. When does eternity begin? If you are living in eternity, what does that mean for your hopes and dreams, your struggles and your spiritual growth?

Session 5 continued

11. How do you know when something is true? Give examples.
12. When you are operating from information that you trust, how does that influence your attitude?
If Jesus vision of the kingdom of God is true, then what qualities can we expect to develop in our lives?

For Further Reflection

We often think of “truth” as referring merely to factual information. Clearly, Jesus was revealing to us truth that cannot always be categorized neatly or proven scientifically. What gives you encouragement and confidence as you seek to live the world-as-it-should-be? What does truth mean to you, when you are sad, weary, confused, or angry? What truths provide stability for you as you move forward?