



# Can the Kingdom of God Break Out of Christendom?

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## Expecting the Unexpected

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**I**n Hawaii we visited a volcano famous for its red-hot streams of flowing lava. As soon as the hot lava hits the air, it cools rapidly, forming black crusts so hard it can be walked on while molten rock flows inside. But the heat and pressure builds relentlessly until the powerful sizzling red lava breaks unexpectedly out of its casing here or there, forcing its way to the ocean.

When I saw it, I was reminded of the history of God's Kingdom on earth. When Jesus announced the coming of God's Kingdom, He revealed the coming of a powerful movement of God that has worked its way relentlessly around the world ever since.

First it burst the bounds of Judaism, shocking the disciples who expected the Messiah's Kingdom to overthrow the Romans and re-establish the rule of their people. Instead, it burst out of the hardened strictures of Mosaic Law, bringing its transforming power into the Greco-Roman world—toppling no governments, except those ruling people's hearts.

Paul called this amazing move of God into the Gentile world "the mystery of the Gospel," hidden in prophetic writings but revealed in his day. Peter exclaimed, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right!" (Acts 10:34).

In the first century, the Kingdom of God broke out in unexpected places, from Rome to Ethiopia to Persia to India. As each expression of the Kingdom of God took form and hardened into casings created by mankind, the movement would slowly grind to a halt.

But, as Jesus predicted, the power of God is not so easily tamed and contained. While the Roman believers co-opted their empire's government structure and cultural strengths to organize and try to manage this phenomenon, God was establishing His Kingdom

in Celtic Ireland, far from their control—through a former slave boy! Meanwhile, the blacklisted Nestorian believers carried the message of the coming of God's Kingdom as far as China.

Far from being a history of God establishing His Kingdom through man-made ecclesiastical structures, we find the living power of Jesus has not ever been effectively contained by the best efforts of His followers. The invention of the printing press ripped the Bible itself from their control, producing a red-hot reformation complete with the radical reaffirmation that through Jesus all believers are priests with direct access to God. Do we still believe this?

Modern transportation and Internet communication has broken down the last barriers isolating people groups from this amazingly Good News. And we are finding that once again God's Kingdom is refusing to be limited to "Christianity-as-we-know-it"!

It is our turn to be shocked, like Peter, that God would bestow His Spirit on those outside of our acceptable religion. It was inconceivable to him that pagan households, like Cornelius', could receive God's Holy Spirit (even while uncircumcised and as yet unbaptized!). Likewise, we cannot fathom that God would have "no favorites" today and bestow His Spirit on Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and, in fact, *all* who through meeting a living Jesus "fear Him and do what is right." But His Kingdom is breaking out of the boxes we try to keep it in, again, and He seems to be inviting the least-expected people to His banquet, without our permission.

Indeed, once again God is doing the scarily unexpected. But will we perceive it?

Jesus is alive and building His own kingdom in the hearts of people in many religious contexts. Just like in the New Testament, He does not seem to be concerned that religious structures or forms be established in His name. Once again He has bypassed the competition between religions to go straight to the hearts of all people everywhere who are seeking to truly know God.<sup>f</sup>

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