

Understanding the Kingdom of God

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As a young preacher I was once invited to speak in both the morning and evening services at a small church in my hometown. However, following the morning meeting, I was hurriedly taken into the vestry and informed by the board of elders that I would not be required for services in the evening due to my 'erroneous' views concerning the kingdom of God. That morning I had preached that we do not wait until after death or the rapture to enter the kingdom; rather, the kingdom was already expressed in this age with the coming of Christ and in the subsequent outpouring of the Spirit on God's people. The elders – locked into the idea that heaven and the kingdom of God were essentially one and the same – were convinced we enter both only after death or the rapture.

This episode highlights some of the confused thinking surrounding the kingdom of God. Some of this confusion is because the Bible speaks of the kingdom in a paradoxical manner. It portrays the kingdom as a present reality (Mt 12:28, 21:31; Lk 11:20, 17:21) and yet we are told to pray for it to come (Mt 6:10; Lk 11:2). Those born again of God's Spirit have already entered it (Jn 3:5), and yet one day we will be invited to enter it (Mat.25:34; 2 Pet.1:11). Only through understanding the biblical usage of the term kingdom of God can we solve these seeming contradictions.

The kingdom of God can best be defined as the rule of God in action. To be in the kingdom of God is to be under God's rule; hence, even Jesus – the king of kings – established his kingdom through perfect submission to his Father.[1] Although there is equality within the Godhead, the Son does not strive to find it (Php 2:6), and there is an established governmental order in the function of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.[2] (1 Cor.15:25-28)

The kingdom of God and heaven are not interchangeable concepts, nor is the kingdom and the church. The kingdom of God existed before the church came into being in that the rule of God was already established in the heavens and the earth (Ps.103:19). The church is the agent of the kingdom in the sense that it is in and through the church that the kingdom of God is made evident and the rule of God is manifested. This is not because we claim to be in the kingdom or talk about being in the kingdom or even preach about being in the kingdom, but because we experience the righteousness, peace and joy of being in the kingdom (Ro 14:17).

On entering the kingdom of God the Spirit moves into action to establish the rule of God in our minds. The mind has always been the arena of greatest conflict internally. Now that we are redeemed the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification takes us through the process of establishing our thoughts, ideas and plans under God's rule in his word. The more the mind proves to be obedient to the Spirit the more we will see and confess we have the mind of Christ. We can equally say this is true of our emotions.

God has again and again shown the importance of having our emotions under his rule. There are several illustrations in the lives of men throughout the bible when unruly emotions got the better of the individual. E.g. David and Bathsheba, Demas and this present evil age; both instances illustrate the devastating power of the unruly emotions to be the instrument for destruction in a person. For us to believe that the total soul of a man can be established under the rule of the kingdom is to confess we believe that sanctification can purify the soul, which is mind, emotion and will.

The Kingdom and Israel

In the Jewish mind of Jesus' day, there was great kingdom expectation. The Jews anticipated the coming of the Messiah, the legitimate son of David to occupy his throne. It was believed that the Messiah – in ushering in God's kingdom – would crush all opposition to God's will, destroy Israel's enemies and set up his kingdom rule in the midst of the nation. The whole affair would be highly visible, tangible and material. Sadly the majority failed to recognise Jesus as their Messiah and king. (Acts 13:27) They failed to seize God's moment (Lu.19:44).

The kingdom of God is not religious in the sense that it represents a body of liturgy, form and practice. Neither is it geographical, confined to the 'Holy Land' of historical or present-day Israel.[3] It is not political, being neither democracy, socialism or dictatorships. Nor is it nationalist since it encompasses all nations, colours, and languages. It is not sexist since it embraces both male and female,[4] and it is not racist for it welcomes Jew and Gentile alike.[5] It is God's proactive rule in every sphere.

The unrest in the Middle East continues, and whenever restorers mention Israel they stir up a hornets' nest. A few years ago a series of articles entitled 'The Truth about Israel' appeared in our magazine Restoration. Within weeks we had letters from all over the world, were contacted by Jewish organisations and supporters in several countries, found ourselves the centre of attention in many Christian and non-Christian magazines, and featured in several issues of the Jerusalem Post. The correspondence and articles demonstrated that intense polarisation exists among many people concerning Israel; in fact, Israel remains one of the most divisive issues facing evangelical Christians today. For many, the nation of Israel can do no wrong; for others, she does no right. Restorers refuse to be pigeonholed in either extreme, because neither is correct.

It is unfortunate that many charismatics and evangelicals have become so associated with support of the state of Israel that we have almost created a Christian Zionism, which has no biblical foundation. As a Christian, you are expected to be supportive of Zionism or you are accused of being anti-Semitic or against God's purpose. When seeking to find a biblical view of Israel, we must be careful not to impose a settled opinion upon the Scriptures. We must not interpret Scripture through either the grid of historic fundamentalism, or of present day

political, military, economic or social developments. If we begin with what Jesus and the apostles said about Israel and how they interpreted the prophets, then we will have a clear perspective as to Israel's place in God's plan of restoration.

Following the Flood in Noah's time and God's judgement on the world at Babel, God turned from dealing with mankind as a whole and focused on a man that he could trust - Abram. God called Abram knowing he would respond and base his life on God's direction. Abram was to be the man to introduce the seed of the new world order – the kingdom of God. It is important to note that Abram was counted righteous before he was circumcised, not after.[6] This fact alone shows that our justification before God and receipt of his promises are by faith and not works.

Since Abraham was justified while uncircumcised, then the covenant promises are not exclusive to those who are circumcised – i.e., the Jews. Circumcision was a sign of God's covenant – not the basis for it. This also means that Abraham is the father of all who believe;[7] consequently, those who remain unbelievers – whether Jew or Gentile – are excluded from the covenant promises. Jew and Gentile are received as one in Christ and are Abraham's seed on the basis of faith.[8] Whereas restorers fully accept that God's plan of salvation came first to Israel, they assert it was always intended to include the rest of the world. God's intention from the beginning was much larger than natural Israel. (Is. 49:6)

Genealogically, Jesus is rooted into both Abraham and David.[9] He is not just descended from, but is described as being the Son of David, and the Son of Abraham. This means that he is the one God was specifically referring to when telling David that his seed would succeed him . . . and God would establish the throne of his kingdom forever;[10] additionally, he is the seed promised to Abraham through whom God would bless the whole world.[11]

Restorers therefore see the hope of Israel and the gospel of Christ as two phases of the same purpose of Almighty God. The hope of Israel is the promise made to the fathers – which finds its fulfilment in Jesus Christ.[12] It isn't that God – disappointed with Israel – introduced a replacement theology by discarding Israel and taking up the church; rather, Israel and the Gentiles were together in God's restoration plan from the beginning.[13]

In the time of Jesus, the Jews laid claim to being the people of God through their ancestral roots in Abraham. God spoke through John the Baptist directly to the nation about this self-righteous claim, and warned them that they shouldn't think of themselves as the children of Abraham if they weren't displaying the faith of Abraham. God was well able, says John, to raise up children to Abraham from the stones. God's judgement was already poised to strike at the root of the nation because of its lack of fruit in righteousness and faith.[14]

God rejected the Jews' claim to being the people of God on the basis of natural ancestry. He declared that the sons of Abraham, the true Jews, are those born of faith and circumcised in their hearts.[15] This did not mean that Jesus was anti-Semitic, but that the Jews could no longer trust in a natural heritage because true

sonship of Abraham is not an issue of race but of faith. Jesus declared this very strongly when some Pharisees arrogantly boasted about being Abraham's seed. He wiped out their claim and exposed them as children of the devil because of their persistent and intransigent unbelief.[16] He then sealed their fate by saying that the kingdom of God would be taken from them and given to others who would produce its fruit.[17]

Paul brought us understanding of what happened to Israel by explaining that it was a mystery that had now been revealed to God's apostles and prophets[18]: Israel's fall and setting aside was not God breaking covenant but God keeping covenant with Israel. In calling the Gentiles to himself God was keeping covenant with Israel. What has happened to natural Israel is temporary.[19] Once God has drawn into Christ the full number of the Gentiles, Israel will experience a spiritual awakening - and be grafted in again.[20] Its restoration will be on such a scale that it is likened to resurrection from the dead and will lead to major world-wide harvest.[21] Paul did not say that the return of Christ would trigger this, as many believe, but rather it is the fullness of the Gentiles that triggers the Spirit's moving out to Zion.[22] When the complete number of Gentiles has been redeemed, then he will move quickly to save the Jews. This worldwide spiritual awakening will precede the return of Christ.

The Kingdom and the Arab Nations

Charismatic and evangelical Christians must face up to the fact that unquestioned support for Israel and persistent denunciation of Arabs in the Middle East does not serve the purpose of God. Our Arab Christian brothers – who are far more numerous than our Jewish Christian brothers – feel deeply hurt when fellow Christians behave towards them as though Christ had never truly liberated them. They see the way many Christians give unqualified support to Israel without considering issues of justice as more akin to old covenant understanding than new covenant realities. Restorers strongly assert that God has not only promised an extensive and speedy spiritual awakening in Israel,[23] but has equally promised that the Arab world will turn to Christ as well. Our hope is well beyond a limited visitation on the nation of Israel – it extends right across the Middle East. The domination of Islam will be broken by the love and power of God, and former enemies will be reconciled through their common faith in Christ. As a result of this new found unity there will come world blessing. Israel, Egypt and Assyria (Syria, Iraq, Kuwait and Jordan) will all worship together and become part of God's world-wide army of Spirit anointed evangelists.[24] God has promised and in faithfulness will fulfil these prophetic promises before the return of Jesus Christ.[25]

In Christ the great conflict between the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of God was brought into the open. Jesus came to destroy the devil's work.[26] This he did throughout his ministry, healing the sick, casting out devils and raising the dead. His final and total triumph over the powers of darkness in Satan's kingdom was demonstrated in the Cross and resurrection. Jesus publicly displayed his triumph

in the heavenlies by parading the conquered foes as his captives in the heavens (Col.2:15).

At Pentecost, Peter declared that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was evidence that Christ had assumed the throne of David in the heavens. (Acts 2:32-36) Therefore, the rule of Christ is not in question. The king has a kingdom, comprised of all those under the sphere of his rule – which is why the church is an integral part of his kingdom. But the kingdom is larger than the church, as he rules over much that is outside the church, and is ultimately destined to rule over all. An example is found in the life and rule of king Nebuchanezzar, who was locked in madness until he was willing to acknowledge the extent of God's kingdom rule (Dan 4:17,25,32). The king is on his throne and from there – through the Spirit – he is establishing his rule; first over his people, then through his people in all the world. This is brought about as Christ sends us as the Father sent him (Jn 17:18), empowers us with the same Spirit that he was empowered with (Acts 1:8), and works with us directly to establish his rule in the earth (Acts 8:12). Meanwhile he stays at the Father's right hand in the heavens until his purpose is fully accomplished in our age. Then and then only will he return[27] and submit the kingdom of God to the Father again.[28]

The Kingdom and the Church

The degree which the church readily submits itself to the rule of God determines the extent to which it moves in the power of the kingdom and is able to demonstrate the authority of Christ's name in every situation of life. The Christian community is a kingdom family. The establishing of his rule over our volatile emotions enables us to respond to the command of Jesus to 'love one another'[29]. In the passages cited, the emphasis is on the rule of God in action – as opposed to feelings.

The primary operative principle in the kingdom way of life is that of servanthood. We are seen as sons of the kingdom when – as Christ – we serve one another.[30] Conversely, the natural tendency of unregenerate man seeks to use everyone outside of oneself for personal ends and interests. In the kingdom, the serving principle is at the heart of all ministry of elders to their people.[31] The foundation of kingdom living and kingdom ministry is that we are servants.[32] As such, it is our joyful expectation that one day we will hear our Master's voice saying 'well done good and faithful servant'.[33]

The Kingdom and Social Justice

The threshold of the throne of God from which God rules stands on the twin pillars of righteousness and justice (Ps 89:14; 97:2). Ours is not simply a message of blessing and a heart right with God, but of justice in every way for all men. The question of human justice cannot be relegated to the socio-economic or political

spheres, to be pushed aside as something of no interest to the Christian community. Both righteousness and justice are basic to our gospel and our experience. Our understanding of what is right and our conviction of what is just come from a revelation of God's heart for mankind. God is not British or American, he is not a Westerner or an African, he is not a Baptist or a Pentecostal, and therefore what is right and just does not spring from a bias in any national, denominational, cultural, or racial context. What is right and just is defined by God in the highest law of his kingdom.[34] As a child which of us was not at some time or other frustrated with our being treated 'unfairly' by others. Justice is when God demands all are treated alike – fairly. He condemns partiality or favouritism since it is unfair therefore unjust. There are times when God does not appear to be just – as the Psalmist complained, 'why do the wicked flourish?' but then God showed him justice is for the long view. (Ps. 73:17-20, 27)

Isaiah highlighted our liberation mandate saying "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?" (Isa. 58:6-7) The retreat of evangelicals from the frontiers of social activism into personal soul saving has led to a tragic surrender of responsibility and contributed to the waning of evangelical influence and a devaluation of our gospel. For Christians to express their 'concern' for the 'dying souls of men' and take no responsibility for the pursuit of peace and justice, or involve in the social concerns of our time, is to live in conflict with God's purpose. The scope of God's restoration not only involves the redemption of our soul, but a return to our mandate to act on God's behalf in every situation we find ourselves. Redeemed man is to be on the cutting edge of the pursuit of justice, peace, environmental concerns, and social progress. This does not mean that seeking to reach mankind with the gospel of reconciliation takes second place to social concerns. What it does mean is the need to see man as an integrated whole the restoration process is a holistic one. The total redemption God offers is for the total unredeemed person, affecting all aspects of human existence. God's restoration purpose not only gives us a concern for the soul of the man in the gutter, it provokes a response to seeing his external conditions changed.

We don't simply say to the homeless and hungry 'get right with God'; rather, we seek to alleviate their suffering and look for a way to address the root causes of their situations. Jesus responded practically to the needs of the homeless, hungry, imprisoned and dispossessed of his time, and in his life and preaching addressed the causes of those conditions. He probably would have gone down in history as one of the greatest philanthropists of all time, had he not preached! The works of Jesus were received everywhere, but the words that preceded, accompanied or followed those works struck as an axe to the root cause of human injustice.

The engagement of the Christian community in humanitarian relief and development programmes is desirable, but a continuing failure to address the causes that produce such needs is a shame in our time. Our pastoral charge on

God's behalf is to love our fellow man, whereas our prophetic calling demands that we confront injustice wherever we find it. Prophetic restorers believe that it is not enough to stay in the comfort zone of good works; we must be prepared to continue our good works in the uncomfortable zone of prophetic confrontation. This points to the need for recognising that apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers are set in the wider context of the church in the world. We cannot afford to limit our function exclusively to religious settings and religious people.

Baptised into Christ means we are also baptised into the world's needs, deprivations, hurts, pains, injustices and wrongs. We must give ourselves to actively working for change. The early Christian community turned the world upside down by its preaching, teaching and practical living (Acts 17:6). The practical living was not isolationist and religious, but was outworked through the principles of the kingdom of God in their everyday life.

The Kingdom and a Prophetic Voice

Before there can be personal or social transformation there must of necessity be prophetic confrontation. When people do not have the fear of God they lose the sense of the sanctity of life. In today's world – with the fear of God in little evidence - abortionists continue to seek to normalise the destruction of unborn children, while other so-called progressive 'reformers' increase political and social pressure for euthanasia to become an accepted way of terminating life. Abortion is the consequence of cheapening the sanctity of life. It has become the ultimate form of birth control. Society has decided that terminating the life of an unborn child is acceptable in order to maintain the 'convenience' of the parent(s). Similarly, advocates of euthanasia are asking the government and courts to step aside and allow people who are feeble and elderly to have their lives terminated 'with dignity' for the convenience of remaining family members. This is dangerously reminiscent of the Hitlerian view of life in Nazi Germany. People may use sentimental and sympathetic arguments to support their actions, but none of those excuses or claimed reasons provide the basis for taking life. Suicide, abortion, homicide and euthanasia are all assaults upon God's divine image and purpose in life. It is incomprehensible that the same society that can sanction the killing of untold millions of children in the womb every year should then be anguished and distraught over widespread outbreaks of violence in society. When society shows collective violence on the unborn, it opens itself to violence on itself as it transfers its moral values to the next generation.

At the same time let me say that where someone has participated in sanctioning abortion, had an abortion, or even performed an abortion, and has subsequently realised the wrong of this and repented, there is forgiveness with God. Restoration is not only the cleansing of sin and extension of forgiveness, it is also total recovery and reinstatement to fellowship with God. It is tragic when Christians catalogue sins in such a way that some are forgivable, clearing the way for restoration of fellowship; but others forever disqualify one from serving God in certain capacities.

(These vary according to the Christian denomination in which one is reared.)
Restoration has no cut off point in forgiveness; rather, a full restoration to fellowship and servanthood is the divine purpose.

However bad our lives may have been, the grace and mercy of God is greater. Paul reminded the Corinthian believers of this saying,

And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. 1 Cor. 6:11

The Kingdom and the Nations

Although the revelation of the kingdom of God which we receive through Christ and the apostles, is of a spiritual rule and government rather than political or a material one, this does not mean that the political and material sphere of our world is unaffected by it. Although it does not redeem society, culture, politics or the material world it nevertheless does have a transforming influence upon world society.

As the kingdom of God grows so its influence enlarges. It is in this sense that Isaiah prophesies, 'of the increase of his government there shall be no end', and of the vision Daniel had (Dan.2: 31-35,44-45; 7:13-14) of the stone coming down and striking the image of the world empires grows to fill the whole earth, he is prophesying of the global success of the purposes of God in his kingdom. The great commission given to the disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, must not be read as a commission to millions of individuals but in this context the emphasis is on the corporate body of people that comprise a nation. So widespread is the move of God's Spirit in this end time, and so great the harvest that the vast majority of peoples in many nations will turn to Christ and will seek to know from his servants the principles and precepts of the kingdom as applied to the life of a society on earth. Here will be our opportunity to disciple the nations as Loraine Boettner has stated in his book *The Millennium* (published by Philadelphia Press, Presbytery & Reformed, 1958, p.14), 'evil in all its many forms eventually will be reduced to negligible proportions, that Christian principles will be the rule, not the exception, and that Christ will return to a truly Christianised world.'

The revelation of the New Testament clearly depicts the vast majority of peoples in the earth will be born again at the conclusion of history. The fact that this is not apparently so at this time is irrelevant. The purpose of God does not progress by the ebb and flow of circumstance in history, but rather by the divine activity of God's Spirit working in conjunction with his word.

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- [1] John 6:38
 - [2]
 - [3] Luk.17:17-21
 - [4] Gal.3:26-28
 - [5] Gal.3:26-28
 - [6] Rom.4:9-10
 - [7] Rom.4:11
 - [8] Rom.4:12; 1:16
 - [9] Mat.1:1
 - [10] Act2:29-32 c.f. 2 Sam.7:12-13.
 - [11] Gal.3:16 c.f. Gen.22:18.
 - [12] Act 13::32-33 c.f. Acts 28:20
 - [13] Gal.3:8 c.f. Gal.3:14
 - [14] Mat.3:9,10
 - [15] Rom.2:28,29; Gal.3:7
 - [16] Joh.8:31-47
 - [17] Mat.21:43
 - [18] Rom.11:25
 - [19] Rom.11:25
 - [20] Rom.11:25
 - [21] Rom.11:15,26
 - [22] Rom.11:25-26
 - [23] Is.66:8
 - [24] Is.19:19-25
 - [25] Acts 3:21
 - [26] 1 John 3:8
 - [27] Act 3:21
 - [28] 1 Cor.15:15-25
 - [29] Joh.13:34-35; 1 Joh.3:11,14,16-18; 4:7-12, 16-21
 - [30] Mat.20:28 cf. Mat.3:11; Luk.22:27 cf Luk.22:26
 - [31] 1 Pet.5:2; Heb.13:17; Luk.22:24-28
 - [32] Gal.5:13; 1 Pet.4:10
 - [33] Mat.25:21
 - [34] Luk.10:27; Rom.13:9