

TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF CHURCH AND KINGDOM

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Integral to the literature of the missional movement is the concept of participation in the kingdom of God. In fact, the *Missio Dei* is inseparable from the *Regnum Dei*. However, these discussions often overlook any precise definition of the kingdom of God, including its biblical moorings. A number of writers seem to imply that there exists a commonly agreed upon definition of the kingdom of God. Furthermore, this assumed definition is often placed at odds with the concept of the church. To emphasize the church has, in some camps, come to be antithetical to the missional emphasis on the kingdom of God. In other words, those who are “kingdom people” have a superior outlook on life and ministry than those who are merely “church people.” However, a study of the relationship between kingdom and ecclesiological terminology reveals that the church continues to hold a prominent position of responsibility and blessing in the outworking of God’s kingdom plan. This paper will consider the biblical descriptions of the kingdom of God, taking into consideration the various layers of meaning behind the concept of God’s kingdom and the relationship between the kingdom and the church.

The Need for Clarity Regarding God’s Kingdom

As Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren put it, “If we are to understand Jesus properly, we have to make sure we have a very clear, unambiguous understanding of the kingdom. If we don’t get the kingdom right, we won’t get Jesus right. It’s that simple.”¹ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, however, point out that the topic of the kingdom of God in the missional literature is “shot through with biblical inaccuracies, bad interpretations, overgeneralizations, and overreaching implications.”²

The Inadequacy of an Undefined Kingdom

Often, writers refer to God's kingdom without definition. For example Reggie McNeal states, "When we finally realize that our existence is to improve the world, and not escape it, we will grasp that the church is not the point. The kingdom is the point."³ Although McNeal had previously defended the value of the church, his statement contrasting the value of the church with that of the kingdom inadvertently weakens the value of the church. This contrast suffers from a lack of definition of the kingdom on McNeal's part. What is the kingdom in McNeal's thinking and why is the kingdom "the point" in contrast to the church? Based on his statement, it seems that the kingdom has to do with improving the world, but he surely means much more than this. This lack of definition runs the risk of diminishing the role of the church.

In the same way, Michael Frost twice quotes with approval a statement by Howard Snyder: "Church people worry that the world might change the church; Kingdom people work to see the church change the world."⁴ But what do these authors mean by making a distinction between church people and kingdom people? Minimally they imply that church people have a smaller vision of God's work than do kingdom people. However, a lack of definition about the kingdom makes it difficult to evaluate such statements in any meaningful way. In fact, Frost states that the kingdom "has come,"⁵ but later talks about "this coming kingdom."⁶ Is the kingdom that he has in mind present, future, or both? Such a fluid representation of the kingdom results in an unnecessary criticism of the church.

The False Assumption of a Uniform Kingdom

Alan Hirsch warns about identifying the church as the kingdom of God, stating, "We have so divinized this mode of church through centuries of theologizing about it that we have actually confused it with the kingdom of God . . ."⁷ He clarifies this thought by saying,

“Theologically, we are right to say that the church is not the kingdom. It is but a sign, a symbol, and a foretaste of the kingdom of God. And while the kingdom expresses itself in and through the church in powerful ways, it is never the sole expression of it. The church is part of the kingdom, but the kingdom extends to God’s rule everywhere.”⁸ Hirsch gives no definition of the kingdom in his glossary of terms, but seems to view the kingdom as the uniform, universal reign of God.

Hugh Halter and Matt Smay seemingly see no distinctions in the kingdom terminology of the Bible. To them the kingdom is a uniform concept without variations or nuances. They write, for example, “But you *can have* a slice of heaven here on Earth.”⁹ Do they, therefore, equate the sinless bliss of heaven with some measure of blessing here on earth? Again, Halter and Smay state, “When someone adopts a child, brings a kind word of encouragement to someone in jail, renovates a dilapidated home in the inner city, mentors a struggling student, plants trees in an ugly city block, plays music for the elderly, or throws a party for friends . . . it’s all Kingdom, and it’s always good news!”¹⁰ While no sincere Christian would doubt the value of such practices, to equate them with the greatness of the heavenly kingdom leaves something to be desired. To speak of the kingdom of God in such uniform terms distracts from the greatness of the kingdom as well as the role of the church.

James M. Robinson points out the danger of assuming a uniform understanding of the kingdom when he writes cynically, “Anyone who would try to claim that God’s reign has already come, that is, that our world is the kingdom of God deserves to be laughed or cried down.”¹¹ While these writers provide a valuable wakeup call for a lethargic church, their imprecision in referring to the kingdom of God runs the risk of devaluing the church.

Basic Elements of the Kingdom

According to Karl Ludwig Schmidt, the term *basileia* includes the concept of a “king” who possesses power and the “territory” over which the king rules.¹² In simple terms, any kingdom could be characterized as consisting of a ruler, a realm (either political or geographic), and a set of rules (laws specific to that kingdom). A single king might indeed rule over multiple realms with different sets of rules that may overlap or remain distinctive to that realm. Therefore, it would not be surprising to discover that the Bible presents the kingdom of God as multifaceted. The application of kingdom passages in the Bible must take into consideration the identity of the ruler, the realm, and the rules of that particular expression of the kingdom. By viewing the kingdom of God as consisting of overlapping layers that include some common elements and some distinctive elements will serve to more accurately apply the meaning of kingdom terminology to discussions about the relationship between the kingdom and the church.

Distinct Layers of God’s Kingdom

That the kingdom of God as described in the Bible consists of multiple layers with both common and distinctive elements is evident from a review of broadly recognized aspects of God’s rule over His creation. Paul hints at this layering of the kingdom when he writes about the future resurrection, stating, “Then the end will come, when he (Christ) hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power” (1 Corinthians 15:24, NIV). These kingdom layers include, but are not limited to, the eternal kingdom of God, the political kingdom of Israel, the messianic kingdom, and the spiritual kingdom of Jesus Christ.

The Universal Kingdom of God

It seems appropriate to begin a description of the layers of God's Kingdom by identifying the eternal, sovereign, universal kingdom of God. This layer overshadows all other aspects of the kingdom in the Bible. God in His sovereignty rules as King over His entire creation, accomplishing His will for His glory. In 1 Chronicles 29:11 David proclaims, "For everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all" (NIV). Psalm 47:2 says, "For the LORD Most High is awesome, the great King over all the earth!" (NIV). In Psalm 145:13 David declared, "Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations" (NIV). Jeremiah stated, "But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King" (Jer. 10:10 NIV). In Ephesians 1:11, Paul refers to "the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (NIV). This universal kingdom has God as its ruler, the whole universe as its realm, and the sovereign will of God as its rule.

The Political Kingdom of Israel

Beneath God's universal kingdom lies a kingdom layer that includes the mediatorial rule of human kings. Most prominent in the Old Testament is, of course, the political kingdom of the nation Israel. Originally ruled by God Himself as a theocratic kingdom, the people of Israel eventually demanded a human king. In the face of this demand God told the prophet Samuel, "It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king" (1 Sam. 8:7 NIV). Over a period of about four hundred years the nation of Israel existed under the rule of a line of kings of widely varying spiritual character and political acumen. The realm of this kingdom included God's chosen people living in the land of promise, a land whose borders expanded or contracted depending on the political climate. It reached its greatest geographical dimensions under the

reign of Solomon, who “ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt” (1 Kings 4:21). The rule under which these kings were to operate was the Mosaic Law. God expected these kings to “write” a copy of the law, to “read” the law throughout their lifetime, and to “revere” God by carefully obeying the law (Deut. 17:18-20). The Mosaic Law served as the basis for the spiritual and political life of the nation of Israel. Regrettably, most of the kings of Israel failed to follow God’s law, bringing about the destruction of the nation. However, to the greatest of Israel’s kings—David—God made the promise of an eternal dynasty, declaring, “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:16 NIV). This promise would find its fulfillment in the messianic descendant of David and the messianic kingdom, an extension of the political kingdom of Israel.

The Messianic Kingdom

Psalm 2, a Messianic Psalm, says, “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, ‘I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain’” (Psalm 2:4-6 NIV). Anticipating the ultimate anointed king, the people of God were eager for the arrival of the Messiah. Jesus, as a descendant of David, entered the scene of human history as the fulfillment of these messianic expectations. He proclaimed, “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15 NIV). The layer of God’s kingdom that Jesus described as “near”—the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, phrases used interchangeably—was an extension of the political kingdom of Israel but under the unending rule of God’s Messiah. As an extension of the kingdom of Israel, the Messiah would reign over God’s chosen people, the Jews, with the seat of His throne in Jerusalem (or Zion). From there His rule would spread over all the earth (Ps. 2:8-

10). The rules for this layer of the kingdom would continue to be the ancient Mosaic Law as interpreted by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and tempered by grace (John 1:17).

However, this messianic kingdom never came to fruition during the earthly ministry of Jesus. While the kingdom was “near” in the person of the king, it was not yet “here” because the Jewish people rejected their king. The kingdom of God in its messianic form had come “among” the people inasmuch as Jesus, the king, lived among the people (Luke 17:21). While some translations take the Greek preposition *entos* in Luke 17:21 to mean that the kingdom of God was “within,” it seems preferable based on the context to translate *entos* as “among.”¹³ This translation certainly fits the range of meaning for this preposition.¹⁴ Jesus was addressing a group of Pharisees at the time, and it would be hard to imagine Him saying that the kingdom resided within these religious leaders who had rejected His claims. There is no incontrovertible evidence in the New Testament that supports the idea that Jesus inaugurated this layer of the kingdom of God, that is, the messianic kingdom, during His first advent. While He offered the kingdom, that kingdom was not yet established due to unbelief. For this reason Jesus could teach His disciples to pray with future anticipation, “Your kingdom come” (Matt. 6:10 NIV). In His parable of the ten minas Jesus corrected the misimpression that the kingdom of God would “appear at once” (Luke 19:11-12 NIV). The fact of the delayed kingdom also accounts for Jesus’ response to His disciples at the time of His ascension. The disciples asked, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6 NIV). Jesus responded by telling them that it was not for them “to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:7 NIV). These words are reminiscent of Jesus’ statement in Matthew 24:36 in regard to His second advent, “But about that day or hour no one knows” (NIV). The arrival of the

messianic kingdom would have to wait for the return of the messianic king, the “King of kings and Lord of lords” according to Revelation 19:16 (NIV). As Chrys C. Caragounis states, “By way of conclusion it may be said that during Jesus’ ministry the kingdom of God is spoken of always as a future event. It is expected, hoped for and prayed for. But it is never said explicitly to have arrived”¹⁵

The Spiritual Kingdom of Christ

While Jesus’ reign on earth over His messianic kingdom awaits a future day, He still reigns as a king over the hearts of His followers today. This layer of God’s kingdom consists of an inner spiritual kingdom. Jesus is the ruler, those who believe in Him constitute His realm, and the law of Christ serves as the rule for this kingdom.

Although kingdom terminology is frequent in the Gospels, the New Testament Epistles use it sparingly. Often the references to the kingdom in the Epistles point to a future kingdom, a kingdom that believers will one day inherit (1 Cor. 6:9-10; 15:24, 50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; 2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:1, 18; Heb. 12:28; James 2:5; 2 Pet. 1:11). The proclamation of the early church did, indeed, include the concept of the kingdom of God (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31), but the emphasis on the future kingdom seems to have been prominent (Acts 14:22).

However, Paul did refer to a present form, or layer, of the kingdom of God. In Romans 14:17-18 he wrote, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval” (NIV). This present kingdom, therefore, is an inner spiritual kingdom characterized by righteousness, peace, and joy. In 1 Corinthians 4:20 Paul states, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power” (NIV). Colossians

1:13-14 says, “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (NIV). These inner matters of the heart—righteousness, peace, joy, power, redemption, and forgiveness—point to an inner spiritual kingdom over which Jesus currently serves as king. It may, in fact, be this inner spiritual kingdom that Jesus had in mind when He told Pontius Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36 NIV). Likewise, when Jesus used parables to describe the “secrets of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 13:11 NIV) He likely had in mind this inner spiritual kingdom, a kingdom characterized by receptive hearts (the seed planted on good soil) and growing influence (the yeast permeating the batch of dough).

The Church as God’s Kingdom

During His earthly ministry Jesus both predicted and promised, “I will build my church,” and then immediately pledged to give Peter “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 16:18-19). The concepts of the church and the kingdom go hand in hand. By comparing various layers of God’s kingdom it becomes possible to identify the inner spiritual kingdom with the church itself.

Comparisons and Contrasts between Kingdoms

The various layers of the kingdom of God have significant overlap while maintaining unique distinctions. These comparisons and contrasts revolve around the nature of the ruler, the realm, and the rules of each layer of God’s kingdom. When it comes to the ruler of each kingdom, God is ultimately the King. God rules directly over His universal kingdom. In addition, God ruled through mediatorial human kings during the centuries of the political

kingdom of Israel. The messianic kingdom has as its king the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, as does the inner spiritual kingdom.

The realm of the universal kingdom of God encompasses all creation. However, in the case of the political kingdom of Israel the realm is limited to the Israelites living in the land of promise during the era of the ancient kings. The future messianic kingdom will encompass both believers and unbelievers around the world under Christ's rule. The spiritual kingdom of Christ has as its realm true believers, both Jews and Gentiles, who live throughout the world.

The rule, or law, for the universal kingdom of God is the overarching will of God. For the political kingdom of Israel, the Mosaic Law with its civil and ceremonial regulations served as the rule for the kingdom. The messianic kingdom will likewise incorporate the Mosaic Law but with the added feature of Jesus' guiding grace. The inner spiritual kingdom of Christ has the law of Christ—love—as its rule, but does not incorporate the civil or ceremonial regulations of the Mosaic Law. “You are not under the law, but under grace,” Paul assured his readers (Rom. 6:14 NIV). While the various layers of the kingdom of God possess common features, they also remain distinct in many aspects.

The Church and the Kingdom

Although the New Testament Epistles do include kingdom terminology in reference to God's present work on earth, the word *ekklesia* dominates the designation for God's people. The church, therefore, must have a direct relationship to the kingdom of God. In fact, it makes sense to equate the church with the inner spiritual kingdom with Jesus Christ as its ruler, believers throughout the world as its realm, and the law of Christ as its rule. By distinguishing between the various layers of the kingdom of God and by identifying the inner spiritual kingdom with the church, it would no longer be necessary to rely on an “already/not yet” concept of the kingdom.

God's spiritual kingdom is presently operative in its fullness as the church of God, which is not merely a shadowy or diluted precursor to the "real" kingdom. This spiritual kingdom of God has spiritual discipleship as its primary task, in contrast to a social Christendom agenda. As F. F. Bruce states, referring to the early church, "The kingdom of God which they were commissioned to proclaim was the good news of God's grace in Christ."¹⁶ Spiritual surrender to the king of this spiritual kingdom takes center stage in the work of the church. The church, therefore, is prominent and the gospel of salvation is preeminent in this layer of God's kingdom.

So, should the church as the spiritual kingdom of Christ touch on such earthly issues as social justice or relief for the poor? Since the law of Christ is the rule for this spiritual kingdom, such activities do indeed play a role in the church's mission. According to Galatians 6:2 the law of Christ includes carrying "each other's burdens" (NIV). More expansively, the law of Christ would include His identification of the greatest commandments coupled with His declaration of His new commandment. The greatest commandments involve loving God and neighbor (Matt. 22:37-39) while the new commandment involves loving one another (John 13:34-35). James refers to love for neighbor as the "royal law" (James 2:8 NIV), a law relating to a kingdom.

Rather than relying on vague references to other layers of God's kingdom, such as the laws relating to political Israel or the future messianic kingdom, to motivate the church toward issues of social justice and reform, the church finds a compelling call toward these activities in the very law of Christ. Herein resides the motivation for providing physical relief for the poor and thirsty (Luke 25:34-36). But that motivation revolves around Jesus Christ as king, and therefore the saving message of the gospel of Jesus Christ lies at the epicenter of His kingdom work. Furthermore, the church of Jesus Christ remains the focal point of God's blessing and kingdom work in the world today.

¹ Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 34.

² Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011) 116.

³ Reggie McNeal, *Missional Communities* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011) 24.

⁴ Michel Frost, *The Road to Missional* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011) 80, 103.

⁵ Frost, 28.

⁶ Frost, 110.

⁷ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006) 51.

⁸ Hirsch, 51, footnote 4.

⁹ Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008) 90.

¹⁰ Halter and Smay, 90.

¹¹ James M. Robinson, quoted in David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011) 177.

¹² Karl Ludwig Schmidt, “βασιλευς,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 1:579.

¹³ Walter L. Liefeld, “Luke,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 8:997.

¹⁴ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4th ed., trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2nd ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), s.v. “εντος,” 269.

¹⁵ Chrys C. Caragounis. “Kingdom of God/Heaven,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 425.

¹⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*. Rev. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 35-36.