

TITLE:

How does understanding of the meaning of the Kingdom of God influence the theology of salvation? How does this in turn have bearing upon the nature of mission?

A..... *Alternative views of 'the Kingdom of God'*

B..... *Alternative views of salvation*

C..... *Alternative views of mission*

D..... *Critique: How did Jesus view the Kingdom of God?*

E..... *Implications for Missionary Theology*

A. Alternative views of 'the Kingdom of God'

It is a given of modern missiology that there has been a historical polarisation in the understanding of 'the Kingdom of God' between the three main missionary traditions (Evangelical, Liberal and Catholic). This profoundly affects their approach to mission itself.

The Reformed tradition saw the Kingdom primarily in personal, spiritual terms. Thus Calvin, despite his strong doctrine of God's universal sovereignty, says that

...God reigns when men, in denial of themselves, and contempt of the world and this earthly life, devote themselves to righteousness and aspire to heaven.¹

This must be understood in the context of his rejection of the Roman Catholic concept of *Christendom*. Rome saw the Kingdom in concrete terms, as a direct equivalent to earthly kingdoms, and very closely allied to the temporal power and influence of the Pope. The Catholic view of 'the power of the keys' had very much in view that God's Kingdom would be consummated as and when the whole world submitted to the Church, and its head on earth.

For Calvin and the other Reformers this was neither theologically nor practically tenable. Whilst Calvin in particular had a strong view of the Church as the spiritual arm of a society under God, the centrality of salvation by faith led him to see the truly faithful as the sons of the Kingdom, and essentially as co-terminous with the Kingdom itself. This view prevailed in Evangelicalism, and became accentuated with the later weakening of the balancing doctrine of Providence under Arminianism and Pietism. Paradoxically this 'spiritual' conception of the Kingdom was reinforced,

The Meaning of the Kingdom of God and Mission

rather than weakened, by the rise of premillennialism in the late nineteenth century. By stressing the eschatological Kingdom 'out there' rather than that of faith 'within you', it moved evangelicalism even further from any conception of God's reign in this world.

The understanding of the Kingdom in more liberal circles is somewhat complex, having undergone a number of changes over the last century as the liberal-ecumenical mission movement developed. At first, under the influence of Kant, Ritschl maintained the 'internal' view of the Kingdom, but re-interpreted it

in primarily ethical terms as the organisation of redeemed humanity, whose actions are inspired by love.²

His immediate successors, emphasising the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man³, sowed the seeds of the liberal agenda of social action which has developed since.

The subsequent views of Schweitzer renewed interest in eschatological interpretations of the Kingdom. There have been various strands in this debate, but broadly speaking Schweitzer's assertion that Jesus saw his ministry as the introduction of an eschatological crisis in history, has been retained. His opinion that Jesus was mistaken in this has, however, been modified.

Accordingly the predominant view has become that Jesus' ministry was intended to introduce a new world-order, of which his own incarnation is the paradigm. His own self-emptying, self-sacrificing love reveals to the world the nature of God, who is also self-emptying and self-sacrificing. As men

The Meaning of the Kingdom of God and Mission

discover God's solidarity with the world's suffering, either through or despite the Church's witness, a process of change begins which, at last, will see the end of all that opposes God's loving character.

B. Alternative views of salvation

The generalisations above are of course over-simplistic, and in particular fail to recognise the changes in Rome's position since *Vatican II*, nor the fruits of dialogue between the other two groups especially since the *Lausanne* conference in 1974. They nevertheless represent real differences of understanding, going to the heart of the interpretation of the gospel of salvation.

The mediæval Roman position equated the Kingdom of God with the temporal structure of the Church. The subjects of the Kingdom were, therefore, those who came under the allegiance of Rome. Salvation was conceived of in the avoidance of eternal punishment, even more than in the attainment of bliss. It was gained through baptism, the new birth, just as citizenship of the world had been gained through birth. All else might be spiritually beneficial, but was certainly not essential. Thus, although Christ was the source and head of all these blessings, even complete ignorance of him was compatible with salvation.

This, as will be obvious, was complete *anathema* to Evangelicals. Only those who were 'born again' could experience, or even see, the Kingdom (Jn.3.3). The Kingdom was the community of the faithful – salvation was being a son of the Kingdom through faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Only those who had committed their way personally to Christ participated in the

The Meaning of the Kingdom of God and Mission

Kingdom. Premillennial eschatology added the dimension that this participation belonged largely to the future. Nevertheless, Evangelicalism shared with Catholicism its spiritual conception of salvation.

The liberal agenda in its various forms, however, saw salvation primarily either in ethical or socio-economic terms. If loving one's neighbour summed up Christianity, then the way was open to radical religious inclusivism and even universalism. Indeed the emphasis on realised eschatology made the hope of heaven irrelevant – or even immoral, since the highest expression of love would be to sacrifice your own salvation for others. Virtue becomes its own reward, and personal salvation is, to a greater or lesser extent, downplayed:

Luther's cry, 'Where do I find a merciful God?' is changed to 'How can we be merciful neighbours to each other?'⁴

This leaves a vacuum which, given the earthly compass of God's Kingdom, led the way to seeing salvation in structural terms. If Christ's Kingdom proclaims good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind and release for the oppressed⁵, then salvation

...manifests itself in the struggle for (1) economic justice against exploitation; (2) for human dignity against oppression; (3) for solidarity against alienation; and (4) for hope against despair in personal life.⁶

C. Alternative views of mission

Not unnaturally these radically different views of salvation have led to fundamentally different concepts of the Church's mission.

The Meaning of the Kingdom of God and Mission

The Catholic view, as presented above, would see success in bringing the Kingdom of God in proportion to the number of those baptized into the Church. There is no inconsistency in using temporal power to influence this, for the Church is a temporal as well as a spiritual Kingdom. Equally there is nothing wrong in using spiritual influence to gain temporal power for Rome.

This principle is seen in Pope Alexander VI's Bulls of 1493⁷, granting Spain and Portugal both trading and missionary rights in new lands. However, it is only fair to note that, in practice, the Church had a broader vision, and Alexander went on to call for '*God-fearing and virtuous men...capable of instructing the indigenous peoples in good morals and in the Catholic faith.*'⁸

Protestantism's missionary commitment came much later than Rome's, although it might be more accurate to say that its mission was initially restricted to those immediately under its influence. The overriding concern, as the previous sections would indicate, was personal salvation through faith in Christ, for in this way the Kingdom would grow. So the *Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts* resolved in 1701 that

...the design of propagating the Gospel in foreign parts does chiefly and principally relate to the conversion of heathens and infidels, and therefore that branch of it ought to be prosecuted preferably to all others.⁹

This document actually commends evangelism in preference to the care of expatriate churches, but it also shows the preference for evangelism over socio-economic mission. However, this priority really only became a *dichotomy* in reaction to the liberal 'Social Gospel' agenda during the last century or so. Thus, for example, George Whitefield's designs to educate

The Meaning of the Kingdom of God and Mission

American blacks and house English orphans stemmed from concern for their social, as well as their spiritual, needs. But in terms of their understanding of the Kingdom, Protestant mission interest was primarily spiritual.

They, like the Catholics, were willing to use, and sometimes be used by, the Colonial powers. In their case, however, the very other-worldliness of their intentions tended to make them insufficiently concerned for the structural sins of the powers.

For the liberal camp, their views of salvation led to corresponding views of mission. So for a Schweitzer, it was sufficient to bury oneself in the jungle and serve others, because mission simply meant imitating the ethics of Jesus. The later view of salvation in terms of socio-economic improvement led to a mission of involvement with the suffering and oppressed. This might involve efforts to share Western technology with the poor (as Emmanuel Mesthene¹⁰), or political liberation (*e.g.* Shaul¹¹). In some cases God and his Kingdom became so subsumed to the concept of solidarity with the underprivileged that mission became the tool of an essentially secular worldview:

It was hard to see exactly how mission differed from the ethos and activities of the Peace Corps.¹²

D. Critique: How did Jesus view the Kingdom of God?

The limitations of these three approaches to mission arise, I suggest, from inadequate understandings of the biblical concept of the Kingdom of God. As several recent reviews of the OT material have pointed out^{13,14,15}, Kingdom theology is intrinsic, if not explicit, throughout. In all cases the

Kingdom is a *dynamic*¹⁶ concept of God's active rule, rather than a state or still less a place.

From the start of the Bible, God disposes of his creation like a king, and judges sin, once it appears, as a lawgiver. Before Genesis 12, he is seen controlling the destiny of the world and governing those within it. His covenant with Noah echoes the vassal-treaties of the ancient kings, and it applies to the whole world.

This becomes clearer in his covenant dealings with the Patriarchs and Israel. With the latter he comes to dwell as king, rewarding virtue and punishing lawlessness, fighting on their behalf (even providing 'imperial troops' on occasion, *e.g.* Josh. 5.13*ff.*), and seeing their desire for a king as rebellion (Judg. 8.7).

The Davidic throne is presented as the authorised representative of his rule, and in the developing Messianic hope this becomes perfected, and starts to merge with the concept of God himself coming to reign. He is the king of the whole earth in the Psalms and prophets, especially Isaiah, and his future reign over Israel begins to become a reign over the whole world.

The later OT witness, and the inter-testamental developments in apocalyptic, come to terms with the failure of Israel's fortunes by a highly eschatological view of the Kingdom. But God's present reign was never in doubt – what was expected was the *revelation* of his kingdom by the defeat of his enemies, the abolition of sin, and so the establishment of his *uncontested* rule.

The Meaning of the Kingdom of God and Mission

The ministry of Jesus, though it brought profound new insights and application, actually fits these expectations quite closely. His message that the kingdom was *ἤγγικεν* (at hand) did not mean that God was about to rule (for he already *was* ruling), but that his rule would be revealed.

Much in Jesus' teaching, and in the apostolic doctrine, echoes the apocalyptic expectation of an eschatological crisis.

But his teaching on the Kingdom's imminence can only be understood in terms of a new degree of revelation through *him*, and particularly through the Passion events. The Kingdom is *now* revealed in him, partly through power and miracle, but paradoxically and critically through suffering. And more to the point in the context of mission, the ascended Christ, who thereafter starts to reign at the throne of God, reveals more of the Kingdom through the church he has established.

So the question is not whether the Kingdom will come hereafter, or has come already, or has been inaugurated with a later consummation in view. Instead it is the degree of revelation that matters:

It is not the difference between the incomplete and the complete; it is the difference between the hidden and the manifest.¹⁷

E. Implications for Missionary Theology

The task of mission, therefore, is fundamentally that of *revealing* the Kingdom of God, which is already a present reality, in expectation of the second coming of the King, who will reveal it finally and fully.

The Meaning of the Kingdom of God and Mission

As Newbigin points out, the present incompleteness of that revelation is intrinsic to its nature:

It is in the mercy of God that the final unveiling of his power is held back so that all the nations may have the same opportunity that was given to the first hearers in Galilee...¹⁸

So the mission is to announce the Good News of repentance and faith, as in the Evangelical model (to which response must be, essentially, individual), but at the same time to reveal its presence through whatever means are commensurate with the ministry and commission of Jesus.

Exactly what this means in practice will depend on opportunity and vocation. Jesus himself did it through his teaching, through his own moral character, through his attitude to others, and through demonstrations of divine miracle. He had little or no personal influence on the ungodly structures around him.

This was no accident, and neither was the fact that *'not many of you were wise...not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.'* (1 Cor.1.26). This reveals not simply God's 'bias' toward the poor and powerless, but that his Kingdom will be best demonstrated by such. So the majority of believers in the world ought to be those lacking in power – and so it is still today. Their patient testimony shames the world, saves the world – and even changes the world in the direction of the Kingdom of peace. Perhaps it is notable that miraculous gifts are more often seen amongst these people.

Some, in contrast, were always people of rank, education and influence. Just as Jesus used divine power to show the nature of the Kingdom,

The Meaning of the Kingdom of God and Mission

there is no reason why the earthly power he gives to a minority of believers should not be used in the same way. This gives validity to the injunctions to identify with the poor, to work against unjust structures and so on.

But for both groups, the criteria for action are the powerlessness and meekness of Christ. The means that Jesus chose to use *are* the revelation of the Kingdom, and it is all too easy to subvert this. So the use of temporal power in the Catholic model outlined is in itself a betrayal of the Kingdom. But equally, harnessing the revolutionary power of the masses is a demonstration of the world's ways, not Christ's.

Christians may be powerless to avoid either extreme totally, and this does not negate their mission, but rather characterises it. Their role might be to temper the injustice of the oppressor, if that is where they find themselves (Eccles. 4.1), or to temper the vengeance of the oppressed (Eccles. 10.5-7). But the Kingdom is always shown by its *means* rather than by its *ends*, for the ends are in God's sovereign hands (since he has always been King of all the earth), whereas the means have been committed to us by Christ as his willing subjects.

2503 words.

¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.XX.42.

² Caragounis 1992, p.420.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Bosch, 1991, p.396.

⁵ Lk.4.18, quoting Isa.61.1

⁶ WCC 1973:98, quoted in Bosch, *loc. cit.*

⁷ Neill, 1986, p.121.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* p.193.

¹⁰ Bosch, *op. cit.*, p.396.

- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
¹² *Ibid.*, p.326.
¹³ Beasley-Murray, 1986, pp. 17-25.
¹⁴ Caragounis, *op.cit.*, p.417f.
¹⁵ Wright, 1992, pp.243-251.
¹⁶ Caragounis, *op. cit.*, p.420.
¹⁷ Newbigin, 1989, p.105.
¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.106.

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