

Jesus And The Gospel Of The Kingdom

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The phrase "kingdom of God" occurs prominently in the Gospels compared to the rest of the New Testament. This reflects its extensive use by Jesus. Yet other themes in the Gospels receive more attention from Jesus than this one, for example, riches and discipleship. So how central is the "kingdom of God" theme to the Gospels? Furthermore the Cross is *the* central theme in the Gospels, yet seldom is the phrase "kingdom of God" associated with the Cross. (The only time it is mentioned in the passion narrative is during the Lord's Supper).

The frequency or otherwise of the phrase itself is of little help. A more important consideration is what did Jesus say *about* the kingdom of God in word, and what did He *demonstrate* in deed. In this sense the kingdom of God is on every page of the Gospels, compared to the phrase itself. In fact the "kingdom of God" could well be regarded as a summary phrase for the whole of Jesus' ministry (Luke 4:43, Acts 1:3).

The Old Testament understanding of the kingdom of God presents a variegated picture. It was both a legal and static concept with elements of a redemptive nature. There was no clearly worked out scheme for the future other than perhaps the overthrow of Israel's earthly enemies and the acknowledgement by all men of the God of Israel (e.g. Acts 1:6). They made little or no distinction between the reign and the realm of God's kingdom. The Jews understood both to be centred on the nation of Israel.

Against this understanding Christ came preaching the kingdom of God. He taught that this kingdom was centred in Himself and therefore imminent or close at hand, because He was close at hand. Yet He had in mind a far different idea of what this meant than most of His target audience (Acts 1:6).

Jesus used the phrase "kingdom of God" to encompass this Old Testament kingdom theology as He *applied it to Himself* and redirected it towards the new age that had dawned with His coming. Within the Gospels there is only a gradual realisation of Jesus' own place in the kingdom, as revealed in His words and deeds. All that Jesus said and did encapsulated OT expectations of the kingdom of God. He was Himself the fulfillment of that kingdom. He was the King!

In the life of Jesus the focus of the kingdom of God was the establishment of God's rule/realm through His Messiah. This is seen for example in:

1. The kingship of Jesus was always in view even though there were differing concepts of it (Matt 2:2 cf. 27:37, Mark 15:2).
2. Before the Sanhedrin Jesus used the title "Son of Man" in order to bring out the heavenly aspect of His kingship rather than using what for them would be the more politically associated term "Messiah/Christ" (Mark 14:60-65, w. Dan 7:13ff).
3. The temptation narrative in Matt. 4 was a power struggle to establish the rule and realm of God against that of Satan's.
4. Jesus' teaching established the ethical righteousness of the kingdom of God (Matt 5:3ff), while
5. His miracles were a demonstration, a prelude, of His kingly rule (Matt 4:23; 12:28).
6. The power of the kingdom of God come was also seen when Jesus pronounced sins forgiven (Luke 5:24).

The focus of the kingdom of God come was Jesus Himself. With the incarnation of God the Son a

¹ The substance of Peter's two talks at the Seminar came from his lecture notes for classes in New Testament Biblical Theology.

suitable dwelling place on earth for the localised presence of God was provided that superseded and fulfilled all that the Old Covenant temple had been. That localised presence is centred forevermore in the person of Jesus Christ, Himself the Holy of Holies. In Him the rule of God is both localised and *present* (Lk 11:20, 17:20f), and localised and *future* (Lk 22:16,18), that is *already* here in Christ, but *not yet* here in all its fullness. We await the second coming of Christ for that. The Spirit of Christ is our pledge and already guarantee of what is to come (2 Cor 1:20-22). So we stand firm in the "not yet," in what is yet to come (1 Thess 1:10).

So the presence and evidence of the kingdom among us is not dependant on the display of charismatic gifts, or of being poor etc., but on Jesus Himself, the localised power and presence of the Kingdom of God.

In His fulfillment Jesus has bought together all that was promised under the old covenant. In the OT dispensation the kingdom of God, localised in Israel, was promised to the Patriarchs (Gen 17:6,16:35:11), inaugurated with Moses at Sinai (Ex 19:6) and was realised in King David. Jesus Christ has fulfilled and extended these three epochs of redemptive history in that He has (1) promised the kingdom in His first coming, (2) inaugurated it through the Spirit indwelling the church and empowering it with the Gospel, and (3) will realise it in His second coming.

The OT promises of land (Abraham), sanctuary (Moses), and throne (David) have come together in Christ's fulfillment. So the kingdom of God now centres on His Messiah who has come and who is coming. Hence the kingdom of God has come and is coming in Christ. In this present time of tension, of overlap, of semi-realised eschatology, the teaching of King Jesus, as interpreted in the Epistles, teaches us how to live while we await His return (Titus 2:11-13), while the miracles of King Jesus encourage us to put our hope in His return when He comes to put all things right.

Implications

1. When preaching we should not attempt to describe or explain so much what the kingdom of God is in the Gospels, but rather proclaim that God reigns. The power and presence of that *reign* is in the Gospel. To proclaim the Gospel is to preach the kingdom of God to both the converted and unconverted. The *realm* of that Gospel (kingdom) power then is the whole world.

2. The climax of Christ's words and deeds regarding the kingdom of God was His death and resurrection. This is the kind of king Jesus is, a suffering King. His victory came by way of suffering. Any application now of kingdom principles must go by way of the cross. In shepherding and pastoral care we should remember that the primary focus of kingdom power is not on physical manifestations such as healings, Pharisaical law keeping, political agendas, or a triumphant church, but on works fitting to Gospel repentance, as is meet for those who worship a King who bears the nail prints in his hands (cf. Rev 5:5-6).

Here is the poverty of the preacher/pastor. We are suffering servants for the sake of the King's sheep. If we have learnt what it means to suffer well then we will love well, worship well, and preach and pastor well those under our care.

3. We have been freed from the Mosaic law but we still need to be taught as those who continue to live in this present evil age. Now it is the internal law of kingdom grace working through love that teaches us how to live holy lives (Titus 2:1ff).

4. With respect to the Old Covenant there is now in this age of overlap both continuity and discontinuity. The two must be held in tension on matters such as baptism, church government, Sabbath keeping, etc. It is not enough in such cases to simply appeal to an old covenant paradigm and then assume a straight line continuity to the present as if the Kingdom of God and the discontinuity it brings is all entirely future.

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