

Chapter 2 The Politics of the Kingdom

What is a Kingdom?

Jesus and His disciples viewed the kingdom of God primarily from an earthly political perspective, not only from a spiritual and heavenly one. This is a huge paradigm changer for those who have not considered it before. First let's look at the dictionary definition of the word: kingdom.

In the original 1828 version of the American Dictionary of the English Language, Noah Webster gave eleven entries defining the word kingdom. Probably the most common definition of kingdom in Christian circles coincides with Webster's second definition: "The inhabitants or population subject to a king."¹ When a person becomes a Christian and acknowledges the lordship of Jesus Christ over their life, we say that person is now "in the kingdom." This is the definition that generally relates to the spiritual or heavenly understanding of the kingdom of God.

However, Webster's first definition of the word kingdom is the one that relates more to the earthly political mind set. It is: "The territory or country subject to a king; an undivided territory under the dominion of a king or monarch."² [1] It is similar to his eleventh entry which simply defines kingdom as: "Government; rule; supreme administration."³ I believe this is the primary understanding carried by Jesus and the early Christians when they talked about the Kingdom of God.

Kingdom is a political term. It is a form of government with a king as its sovereign ruler. Therefore, the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of/from Heaven) is a governmental order where the administration of all things is conducted according to the oversight and will of King Jesus. Therefore, when Jesus taught us to pray to the Father, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven"(Matt 6:10 KJV), what was He saying? He was teaching us to pray for the establishment of God's Kingdom rule on earth by which the whole world will come into subjection to Him.

Some will disagree and argue that this portion of the Lord's Prayer, refers simply to the influence of the spiritual world being manifested on earth through the church and that no political overtone should be applied. However, we will see that there is not only a political application, but that this application is more than an overtone. As Paul put it, Jesus will come and "subdue all things to himself" (Phil 3:21). Yes, those of us who know Jesus and the Holy Spirit have the Kingdom of God within us. This Kingdom exists now and we can experience certain limited manifestations of it on earth now. But it is invisible. The Kingdom and its King are yet to appear. When they do, the governmental order of God will rule over the entire earth. This is the gospel (good news) of the kingdom of God and of peace on earth.

The Earthly/Political Understanding of the Kingdom

The point being made is that the modern understanding of the Kingdom of God has been primarily mystical or what might be termed heavenly but the early Christians understood the Kingdom in a more literal and earthly way, which makes it a form of civil government. When we read in the Bible about the Kingdom of God, it is almost always talking about a literal government that will appear on earth. Several points can be made from the scriptures to verify this.

Historical Context

First consider Israel's history and their historical context. Israel had been operating under a monarchial (kingdom) form of government for hundreds of years. Their kings had been men anointed by God to provide direction for the nation and lead them into victory over their enemies. Blessing and victory had been theirs when the kings obeyed God; but when they drifted away from God and His law, they suffered defeat and captivity. This was the situation in Israel when Jesus was born on the earth; Israel was a conquered nation under Roman occupation. [2] Yet Israel had a prophetic promise that God would raise up the Messiah, a King whose kingdom would never come to an end (see Isa 9:6-7).

They Attempted to Install Jesus as King

Therefore, they were expecting a king who would restore Israel as a victorious nation ruled by the King of kings. When Jesus appeared on the scene and people began to understand that He was the Messiah, they thought the time for the Kingdom of God on earth had come. They thought Jesus would establish His throne in Jerusalem, deliver Israel from Roman occupation, and rule the world! At one point the people even tried to force Jesus to be their king and He had to escape (see John 6:15). These things show that the people of Israel and the disciples understood the Kingdom of God in a political way. [3]

They Wanted Jesus Dead

Jesus was viewed as a political figure and therefore as a threat to the political establishment. Yes, Jesus did say, "My kingdom is not of this world." (John 18:36). But this statement was made to Pilate, not to the Jews. Notice he said, "now" (Greek: nyn, meaning now or presently), my kingdom is not of this world. The idea of a spiritual kingdom that was preparing to become earthly did not register as a threat to Pilate, a Roman. But to those Jews who jealously held to their positions of power, someone claiming to be the Messiah and King of Israel threatened their political position. We have to conclude that Jesus was and is a political figure; that is why they wanted Him dead. [4]

The Disciples Question After the Resurrection

After Jesus rose from the dead, and once His disciples realized it, they immediately thought the time had surely come for Jesus to rule the world. That is why they asked this question.

Acts 1:6 (KJV)

6 When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? [5]

Jesus didn't indicate that their question was unusual or that their political perception of the kingdom of God was wrong. He only instructed them not to concern themselves with when the Kingdom would appear as it related to days, months, and years. But in a different way, He did tell them when it would appear by telling them what they must accomplish first. Jesus' answer instructed them to take the good news of the Kingdom to the ends of the earth.

Acts 1:7-8 (KJV)

7 And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.

8 But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

This is essentially the same thing Jesus told them in Matthew 24:14:

Matthew 24:14 (NKJV)

24 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.

We must remember that the context of Acts 1:7-8 is the disciples' question about when the kingdom would be restored Israel. Therefore, to prepare the way for the Kingdom of God to appear on earth is the very reason that we receive power and witness to the end of the earth.

Jesus Gave His Disciples Specific Governmental Assignment

The question asked by the disciples in Acts 1:6 clearly shows the politically oriented understanding of the kingdom that the disciples held. But could they have been wrong? Maybe Jesus was just telling them to stop thinking that way and think about winning souls. I think His answer in the following two verses indicates otherwise, but there is an even clearer indicator. Jesus had actually given His disciples their job assignment in His government! Considering this, it would have been difficult for the disciples to perceive the kingdom as anything other than a literal earthly government!

Matthew 19:28 (KJV)

28 And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. [6]

The disciples took their assignments literally and very seriously. This is reflected in their immediate replacement of Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus and hanged himself (see Acts 1:26). They felt it important to have exactly twelve disciples because they fully expected to rule over the twelve tribes of Israel. They were making preparations to do so by identifying the judge who would take Judas' place.

Some have suggested that, in God's sight, Paul was actually the twelfth apostle. However, since Paul was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 11:13), I submit that Matthias will indeed be one of the twelve judges over the tribes of Israel in the coming Kingdom. This is certainly not a major doctrinal issue but I bring it up to illustrate the literal view of the Kingdom

that Jesus and the disciples held. Either way, we see that Jesus was filling "staff positions" for His administration which will take effect at the appearing of His Kingdom. This concept is also seen in the parable of stewardship, where Jesus spoke of giving faithful servants authority over cities (see Luke 19:17-19). This will be discussed in more detail later.

Another Gospel?

When I read that Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the “gospel of the kingdom” (see Matt 9:35), it makes me wonder about the gospel we have been preaching. We have preached the gospel, but have we preached the gospel of the kingdom? Most presentations of the Christian message say little if anything about the coming kingdom of God. [9] However, Jesus came preaching, not just the gospel, but the gospel of the kingdom (government) of God (see Luke 4:43). This purpose and goal was a central part of His message and it should also be built into our presentation of the good news as well. As long as we are more focused on getting to heaven than we are on getting heaven here, it is not likely that we will build in such a way that prepares the way for the Kingdom of God to appear. If we don't preach the gospel of the kingdom and that we are to prepare the way for it, the gospel we do preach could become a self-centered, self-serving gospel that has little earthly application. Such a message runs the risk of producing an impotent church that carries little or no sense of responsibility for preparing the way for the Kingdom of God.

Some may object to this tone calling it "works oriented" and will no doubt cite Ephesians 2:8-9, “... by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.” I would simply say to read the next verse. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). Faith without works is dead (James 2:14). God has always worked in partnership with man to accomplish His purposes on earth and the same goes for the Kingdom. It won't just appear while we sit by and wait.

God is revealing His strategy to people who will work with Him in making the needed preparations. The coming of the literal Kingdom of God on earth was Jesus' message. It was His parting topic for forty days after the resurrection until He ascended (see Acts 1:3). It was also the topic the disciples preached (see Acts 8:12; 28:31). To see His kingdom come is the very reason we receive power! [10] It is why we witness. It provides motivation to go into all the world. Progress in spreading this gospel of the kingdom is one of the foremost factors in preparing the world for the appearing of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom on earth.

Paradigm Builder

Kingdom is a political term and the kingdom of God will be a literal government that will appear on earth. This message threatened the political establishment of Jesus' day and it threatens the political establishment today.

Before reading this chapter, how would you describe your position regarding this concept?

1 Strongly Disagree - 2 Disagree - 3 Neutral/Unsure - 4 Agree - 5 Strongly Agree

How would you describe your position regarding this concept after reading this chapter?

1 Strongly Disagree - 2 Disagree - 3 Neutral/Unsure - 4 Agree - 5 Strongly Agree

1. Webster, American Dictionary of the English Language (1828 facsimile edition), Foundation for American Christian Education, San Francisco, CA.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

The Kingdom Paradigm, Common Sense Theology for Politically Minded Christians
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