

Expanding the Kingdom

The Kingdom of God Part 2

A Unified Theory of Christian Mission

© Roderick A. Graciano, 1990-2003

The words
“mission” and
“missionary” do
not appear
in the New
Testament...
the teaching of
Christ and the
apostles seems
to begin and
end with this
matter of the
Kingdom!

Introduction

While the church tends to develop its own terminology, partly based on scripture and partly influenced by contemporary culture, the terminology of the New Testament epistles remains the same, a permanent record of ancient nomenclature and expressions. If Paul and the apostles had lived on for 2,000 years, no doubt their vocabularies would have changed with the times. Biblical figures of speech are not so sacred as the principles they express. The danger, however, is that when the church strays too far from biblical terminology, the sacred principles of the biblical text may become confused or diluted.

With the rediscovery of the Great Commission by the Moravians and other non-Catholics in the 1700's, a missions philosophy and vocabulary was born which has continued to evolve and diversify to this day. What is curious to me is how little attention is given to the centrality of the Kingdom of God in the missions lexicon of our time. After all, the words *mission* and *missionary* do not appear in the New Testament (except in modern headings and map titles), while the teaching of Christ and the apostles about the church's mission seems to begin and end with this matter of the Kingdom. The passage that our minds most readily recall when we think of the Great Commission is essentially a kingly—and therefore Kingdom—proclamation: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me...” It may be that some of our struggles in defining missions policy today have to do with the way we overlook the New Testament teaching on the Kingdom of God in our thinking. Perhaps the specialized missions vocabulary of our time has been a limitation, keeping us from seeing the bigger picture. That bigger picture is God's plan to build the cosmic Kingdom that

His Son will reign over forever. We need to amplify our missions vocabulary to properly reflect this.

I contend that everything we discuss under the heading of “missions” can more appropriately be discussed under the heading: “Expanding The Kingdom Of God.” A survey of the New Testament instructions to the Christian community reveals the following list of general priorities under that heading: praying for the Kingdom, proclaiming the Kingdom, and preparing the subjects of the Kingdom for ministry.

Praying for the Kingdom

Christ taught us to pray that God's Kingdom would come (Matthew 6.10). Unfortunately, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we think eschatologically when we come to this line. After all “kingdom come” is a phrase that has become synonymous in the popular mind with “pie in the sky, by and by.” The content of the Lord's Prayer, though, is entirely dedicated to practical concerns pertaining to *this* life. The Lord's intent was that we pray for His Kingdom to increasingly pervade our lives and our world now, in this present time.

Why then did He say that His Kingdom is “not of this world” (John 18.36)? Jesus spoke in this way because His is not just another kingdom that competes in *the present political order*, nor will it even have its full societal manifestation until the millennium. Nevertheless, it is a spiritual rule that advances in our midst in the present day, even as so many of Christ's parables illustrated, such as the parables of the yeast and the mustard seed. A loyal subject of the King cannot help but pray for the increase and prosperity of His Kingdom now.

Expanding the Kingdom

Why pray though, since we know beforehand that God will finish the work He's begun in us, that He will establish His Kingdom, that it will fill the earth as the waters fill the sea, and that Satan will be cast down to reign no more? Our prayers are not needed to persuade God to do what He already intends. They are needed though to fix our own minds and imaginations on the divine goal, and also to open our eyes to the workings of God's hand as we see the Kingdom expanding in harmony with our specific prayers.

Proclaiming the Kingdom

Christ not only taught His disciples to pray for the coming of the Kingdom, He also sent them out to proclaim its nearness and the opportunity for people to enter it (Matthew 10.7). In fact, Christ prioritized the proclamation of the Kingdom above the most fundamental of personal duties. When people asked to be allowed to settle their personal affairs before taking up the duties of the Kingdom, Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the Kingdom of God" (Luke 9.59-62).

Unfortunately, modern doctrines have sometimes obscured our responsibility to proclaim the Kingdom. Dispensationalism has done us a great disservice in differentiating between "the eternal gospel" of Revelation 14.6, and the "gospel of the Kingdom" of Matthew 24.14, consigning the proclamation of the Kingdom to some dispensation unrelated to the church. The "gospel of the Kingdom" is not a reference to post-rapture evangelism by "tribulation saints," but rather is the same, one and only gospel of Paul and the other apostles (Acts 8.12). There is only one gospel. It is the eternal gospel and it is the gospel of the Kingdom. The contemporary church must reclaim the Kingdom dimension of the gospel and then other aspects of the Great Commission will make sense.

The Kingdom and "Missions"

When we understand that the purpose of preaching the gospel is to advance the Kingdom of God, we realize that ministry categories like "missions" tend to be too constricting. The word *mis-*

sions immediately conjures up ideas of penetrating cultures that are foreign both geographically and culturally. The King's mandate to proclaim the gospel, however, focused first upon Jerusalem, the cultural home of the first Christians (Luke 24.47; Acts 1.8). The apostle Paul made it his habit, wherever he went, to proclaim the Kingdom to his own people and culture first in the local synagogue. Did that make him less of a missionary? An American who leads a fellow American to Christ will never be thought of as a "great missionary" but he has expanded the Kingdom of God every bit as much as the missionary who converts a head hunter in Irian Jaya. The church must strike a balance by valuing local evangelistic efforts equally as much as efforts on foreign soil, and vice versa. We must help the church understand that though not every Christian is called to be a "foreign missionary," every Christian *is called* to expand the Kingdom of God!

The Kingdom and Church Planting

This wider category of Kingdom Expansion helps us understand the proper place of church planting in evangelistic efforts. Hit-and-run evangelism by some organizations has prompted a reaction in us that has tended to overemphasize long-term, on-site follow-up. It has been a temptation to disqualify as a "mission" any outreach that did not prioritize ongoing discipleship and ultimately the planting of a local church. To so define mission, however, would reduce the number of Paul's missionary journeys from three to one. The avowed purpose of Paul's "second missionary journey" was not to plant churches but to strengthen already existing ones (Acts 15.36, 41). Though the purpose for Paul's "third missionary journey" is not stated, the summary statement at the beginning of this part of the Acts narrative simply says, "Paul...traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia strengthening all the disciples" (Acts 18.23). Granted Paul took every opportunity along the way to evangelize unbelievers, and granted that strengthening disciples can be seen as part of the "planting" process, but it is difficult to make a case for "church planting" as Paul's ultimate goal. Paul's ultimate goal

Christ
prioritized
the
proclamation
of the
Kingdom
above the
most
fundamental
of personal
duties.

If God's Kingdom is to be advanced in this world, it must be at the expense of Satan's kingdom.

was expanding the Kingdom. That's what Paul did on *every* journey recorded in the book of Acts. Planting churches was simply a natural step in the larger goal.

The Kingdom and Deliverance Ministry

Before leaving the subject of proclaiming the Kingdom, let us recall that there are other dimensions of proclaiming besides strictly verbal ones. In the New Testament, healing and casting out demons is closely associated with the proclamation of the Kingdom (Matthew 10.7,8; 12.28; Luke 10.9). This makes perfect sense. If God's Kingdom is to be advanced in this world, it must be at the expense of Satan's kingdom. To the extent that physical and spiritual illnesses are caused by demons, to that same extent the church is called to confront the malignant spirits behind the illnesses in those who are nearing or have entered the Kingdom of God. Since it is impossible to look at our world today and conclude that demonic activity has diminished, we cannot relinquish this calling. If we are still called to proclaim the Kingdom of God, then we are still called to cast out demons. While God gifted some to be evangelists, He has given others gifts of healing (Ephesians 4.11; 1 Corinthians 12.28). Both gifts, as well as all the others listed in Scripture, should be utilized in the process of proclaiming God's Kingdom today.

Preparing the Subjects of the Kingdom

Equally essential to prayer and proclamation in expanding God's Kingdom is the training of the Kingdom's subjects. Most of what we talk about under the headings of discipleship and ecclesiology fits here. Why do we train Christian disciples? Not just for their own peace and joy, but ultimately for God's glory, and it is to God's glory that they bear much fruit (John 15.8), i.e. that they expand God's rule in their own homes and beyond.

The Implications

Our Three Objectives

In the light of our mandate to expand

the Kingdom, we can look at the Great Commission from a fresh perspective and encapsulate its essential aspects within these three objectives:

1. To promote consistent prayer for the advancement of the Kingdom of God so as to express our dependency upon Him for fulfilling the task, so as to train our thoughts toward the divine goal, and so that we will recognize our progress as His doing.
2. To introduce the Kingdom of God to unbelievers by word and deed so that the world may be confronted with the truth that is in Christ Jesus.
3. To facilitate the preparation of disciple/proclaimers so that every believer may effectively fulfill their role in expanding the Kingdom of God.

A Strategy for Mobilization

Instruction

The first step in fulfilling the above objectives is to instruct our congregations about the biblical priority of expanding the Kingdom of God. This is an essential step, but is not difficult and need not be prolonged. The Old and New Testaments abound with passages about the Kingdom of God. (The gospels alone mention the Kingdom 177 times.) We must faithfully expound such passages to our congregations, and accompany our expositions with calls to mobilization.

Teaching By Example

Pulpit teaching is not enough, however. I have never felt comfortable about instructing people academically to do things that I was not prepared to do. When a friend came to me with his burden to

Expanding the Kingdom

learn how to witness to drunks, I felt compelled to begin regular visits to skid row with him and show him how *I* would minister to derelicts. Teaching by example is always more powerful than teaching by words alone, and experiences of this kind enrich the teacher at least as much as they do the student. Therefore, we who already have the burden for Kingdom expansion must habitually take apprentices with us when we share the gospel with unbelievers at home or abroad. We must also let our peers and our children hear us praying in fresh ways for the expansion of the Kingdom. Furthermore, we must continue to organize and administer our corporate fellowship in such a way as to guard our congregation from getting the idea that local church life is an end in itself. We must sharpen up our communication on why we do the things that we do, explaining at every possible juncture how we hope to expand the Kingdom by our activities. The members of our congregations must understand by our word *and example* that the ultimate end of our Sunday morning activities is to deepen the rule of God in our own lives and to mobilize our congregation to expand His Kingdom beyond our own walls.

Providing Opportunities

We must help people discover how to become involved in fulfilling Kingdom objectives. In our corporate meetings, we must provide opportunities for Kingdom-focused prayer. We must continue to provide short-term mission opportunities as well as creative local opportunities for witness.

Discovering Gifts and Interests

Discovering gifts and interests will better enable church leaders to funnel their people toward ministry and training opportunities. This assessment is most effectively accomplished through small groups. Small-group leaders should make it a personal priority to talk to individuals in their group about how they envision themselves becoming involved in expanding the Kingdom.

Godly Peer Pressure

Something that surfaces in early Christian documents is a set of values

that differs significantly from those of contemporary American Christianity. Early Christians valued holiness and sanctity so much that they competed for the right to remove the sandals of men like Polycarp, just for the privilege of touching one who knew God so well. Early Christians revered their martyrs the way we revere our favorite athletes and movie stars. Early Christians longed for a heroic martyrdom the way a modern churchman might long for renown in his denomination. What comes out in documents like *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, is that such values captured the imaginations of the early Christians, in part at least, because they talked them up. As we listen in to the prison conversations of the early martyrs, by way of the written record, we find the Christians encouraging one another with the idea that there is no greater personal fulfillment than to sacrifice one's life for Christ. When a community talks like that consistently, members of the community get "psyched up" to live like that. Call it peer pressure. God forbid that we should promote values other than those clearly taught by scripture, but our job is to take the clear instructions about expanding the Kingdom of God and talk them up in our Christian community. The personality of our church will be shaped by what it hears steadily lauded in our corporate sharing times and in our personal conversations. Our people need to hear us commending our evangelists. They need to see us calling individuals to the microphone to share when they've had a witnessing adventure during the preceding week. They need to hear us admiring missionaries and intercessors. They need to hear our excitement about expanding the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion: Assessing Organizations and Projects

I believe that the biblical teaching on the Kingdom of God gives us all the context we need for understanding evangelism, discipleship and local church life. I believe it also gives us the means to assess ministries in progress. The question is simply: how effective are they in expanding the Kingdom of God? The issue is not whether a mission is local or foreign, nor whether it involves church planting or

simply planting seeds. Rather, as we come to understand the New Testament teaching on the Kingdom, we should also come to understand what best makes the Kingdom grow, and assess ministries accordingly. I suggest the following as the biblical characteristics of people and organizations that are apt to advance the Kingdom:

1. They have a willingness to suffer (Acts 5.29; 14.22).
2. They practice dependency upon the Holy Spirit (Acts 1.4-6; 2.17,39; 5.32).
3. They communicate the biblical gospel accurately and completely (Acts 20.27).
4. They submit to a Christian community that provides accountability and support (Gal. 2.1-10; Eph. 5.21).

To the degree that churches and organizations display these traits they are to be commended and encouraged. To the degree that subjects of God's Kingdom lack these characteristics, they are to be exhorted!