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The Kingdom of God and Mission

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The aim of this paper is to establish a balanced, biblical understanding of the 'kingdom of God' and then to see what this understanding has to say about the task or mission of the Christian Church in the world today.

1. Principles of Biblical Interpretation

As Anglican evangelicals we approach Scripture as God's authoritative Word, His rule and yardstick for the life of the individual and the Church. Because God the Holy Spirit is the Author of the Bible it is in its entirety true and without error. As God may not be contradicted and cannot contradict Himself, so 'it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another.' (39 Articles of Religion: 20). The message of Scripture is *spiritual*, both as to its contents (the message of salvation through Christ alone) and as to how we are convinced of its truth ('our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.' – Westminster Confession, I.V). Scripture is sufficiently clear even for the unlearned to understand the essentials of salvation. A passage is to be understood in its plain meaning, in its immediate context and in the light of the whole Bible. Principles of biblical interpretation are to be drawn from the teaching and nature of the Bible itself. The main principle is that of comparing Scripture with Scripture in order to reach a full and correct understanding of a text.

All these principles of interpretation have a direct bearing on our study of the Kingdom of God. In particular, however, we need to examine the two main ways in which we can study a theme by comparing Scripture with Scripture:

(a) *By examining the teaching of Scripture about a subject*

We can build up the biblical doctrine of the atonement by studying the various themes applying to it—propitiation, the Old Testament sacrifices, the Passover, the sayings of Christ, the ideas of ransom and redemption, the prophetic passages about Christ's death, the doctrinal teaching of Paul and Hebrews, and so on. All the different strands are brought together to build the total doctrine. We seek to find some central, unifying concept to give cohesion to the doctrine.

(In the case of the atonement the idea of **substitution** has been the unifying element.) A similar approach would be correct in studying the Bible's teaching about the sovereignty of God. *The connexion is the idea, the subject, the topic.*

(b) *By examining the meaning given by Scripture to a particular word or expression*

For example, we understand the various layers of meaning in the word 'righteousness' or 'the righteousness of God' (as in Romans) by seeing how it is used in different passages. The meanings evident in the various passages combine to produce the total concept of 'righteousness'. The phrase 'kingdom' or 'kingdom of God', or 'kingdom of heaven' is a similar *leitmotif*—it is an expression with a breadth and depth of meaning given by the way it is used throughout the Bible. When we read 'the kingdom of God', or 'the kingdom of heaven', or 'kingdom' used in a spiritual or eternal sense, we are guided by all the other uses of these phrases throughout Scripture; we have a definite concept in our mind; the phrase itself has become a shorthand term for a whole complex of ideas clustered around a central theme. The meaning comes from the uses of the phrase itself, principally, and *not* from similar ideas expressed in other words—for instance, about God ruling, commanding. If we were to be influenced by similar ideas couched in different expressions we would tend to confuse the idea of the kingdom of God with the great Scriptural truth of God's sovereignty over all His creation. We should also be forgetting that the New Testament, and the synoptic gospels in particular, use the phrase 'the kingdom of God' to denote a definite and more narrow concept, some aspect of which is about to be illustrated in the ensuing saying or parable. Each use of the phrase adds some more light to the concept; each use is also against the background of the total New Testament meaning of it. In this method of comparing Scripture with Scripture *the link is the word or expression itself*, and *not* similar ideas expressed in different words. A quick perusal of a Concordance will immediately show that a full and consistent meaning is given to the phrase 'the kingdom of God' (and its parallels) in the passages where they appear.

It is this second method of comparing Scripture with Scripture that we shall adopt in our study of the 'kingdom of God', allowing similar themes clothed in different language only to exert a minor influence on our conclusions. This approach reflects the way that Scripture itself deals with the Kingdom.

2. The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament

When John the Baptist and Jesus began their preaching (Matthew 3.2;4.17) there was something very new about the kingdom that they proclaimed. Nevertheless, this kingdom was foretold and rooted in

the Old Testament, where ideas associated with the earthly kingdoms of men were applied and extended to an eternal kingdom that God was building. For clarity, we shall focus on three main elements in the complex picture of the Kingdom of God in the Old Testament, three intertwined strands:

(a) The Covenantal Kingdom

In this strand God is the victorious King who established His covenant and imposed its conditions for blessing on the people whom He had delivered from their enemies: 'I am the LORD thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have none other gods before me.' (Exodus 20.2-3) God exercises His royal rule over all nations in order to redeem and sanctify His own chosen people:

Tell the people of Israel; Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me from among all peoples: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. (Exodus 19.3-6)

This *leitmotif*, 'a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation,' is applied to the New Testament people of God. (1 Peter 2.9; Revelation 1.5-6; 5.9-10) The Kingdom consists of God's elect, His blood-bought people, those who obey His rule, serving Him with spiritual worship and holy lives. The promise of the Kingdom, made to Israel, points forward to, and is fulfilled in, the Church.

(b) The Eschatological Kingdom

The Old Testament also speaks of God's eternal kingdom which endures throughout all generations (e.g. Psalm 145.11-13; Daniel 4.3; Micah 4.7-8). Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the stone that was cut without hands and which destroyed the great image represents the Kingdom set up by the God of heaven (Daniel 2.31-45): it opposes and destroys the kingdoms of men (v.34); it is not made by human hands (v.34), but by God (v.44); it cannot be established or furthered by human activity for it is altogether other; unlike the kingdoms of men, it will never be destroyed, nor leave its sovereignty to another people, but will endure for ever (v.44); it will miraculously fill the whole earth (v.35). Here is a kingdom which is opposed to, transcends and replaces all other kingdoms. In its spread to worldwide proportions we see prefigured the mysterious growth depicted in some of the Kingdom parables in Matthew 13.

(c) The Davidic Kingdom

In the promises of God to establish David's kingdom *for ever* we see the extension of the earthly into the eternal. God promised to David far more than a line of human successors on his throne: 'And thine

house and thy kingdom shall be made sure for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever.' (2 Samuel 7.16—see also vv.5–15) The Messianic promise is of One who would reign on the throne of David:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.' Of the increase of his government and of peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with judgment and with righteousness from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts shall perform this. (Isaiah 9.6–7)

Jeremiah promised a righteous Branch, a King who would deal wisely, and who would be called, 'The LORD is our righteousness.' (Jeremiah 23.5–6) There is also in Ezekiel the promise of the Davidic shepherd-prince who will reign over the united people of God, the new Israel, the Church:

And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd. And I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David prince among them; I the LORD have spoken it. (Ezekiel 34.23–24)

These three strands combine with other Old Testament teaching to reveal an eternal Kingdom promised by God to Israel; the prophets used earthly pictures to depict its eternal and heavenly glories. This is the Kingdom now being realized through the Church, but which will only be perfectly achieved in the eternal realm, with the emergence of the new heavens and new earth. It is a Kingdom whose Maker is God. Over it reigns great David's Greater Son, our Lord Jesus Christ; *He* is the coming King.

3. The Kingdom of God in the New Testament

In approaching the New Testament material we must make two observations:

i. *We are dealing here with a 'LEITMOTIF'*

As in Wagner's operas a melody, or a variation on it, is used to remind us of a particular character, so in the New Testament the phrase 'the kingdom of God', or a variation on it, represents a complex concept. Each use adds something to the total concept, but also reminds us of what is taught about the kingdom in many other passages. The *leitmotif* is a device that pulls together many different ideas, unifying them under the basic concept of 'kingdom'. As in a short story by Thomas Mann a wildflower always worn in a man's buttonhole reminds us instantly of his orderly and precise character—it sums up the man—so the phrase 'kingdom of God' speaks of God's

royal rule for the benefit of His redeemed people with all the complexity of grace and glory which that rule displays.

ii. *We need to be clear about the meaning of 'KINGDOM'*¹

In fact, the phrase 'kingdom of God' (or 'kingdom of heaven', etc.), has a number of meanings—royal power, royal rule, realm (the territory ruled over by a king). Sometimes, in the New Testament, one particular meaning is mainly in view in a passage where the phrase is used; sometimes, two or more emphases are present in the same passage. In general, the Kingdom denotes the royal rule of God, creating the realm of salvation for His redeemed subjects. In some instances, the emphasis is upon the abstract meaning—God's rule, the revelation of His royal power; in this sense the kingdom 'comes', 'appears', 'is at hand', 'is seen'. Other passages—and these are probably in the majority—give the term a concrete meaning—a realm, a sphere of life, a state of things; here the Kingdom can be 'entered', 'sought', 'given', 'possessed', 'received', and 'inherited'. The abstract and concrete meanings are so closely related (the abstract rule creating the concrete realm), that the one can never be rightly considered without any reference at all to the other. It is certainly not true to Scripture so to emphasize the Kingdom as God's rule of righteousness as to forget that it is also the sphere of salvation. The truth of this assertion will emerge from our examination of the New Testament evidence:

(a) **The Kingdom is linked with the Coming of Christ.**

Christ is the Davidic King whose kingdom would last for ever, as foretold in the Old Testament and announced by the Angel Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1.30–33). It is therefore no surprise to find that at the beginning of Christ's public ministry both John the Baptist (Matthew 3.2) and Jesus Himself (Mark 1.15) should proclaim that the Kingdom of God was near. The Lord Jesus said that until John the Law and the Prophets had been proclaimed, but since then the good news of the Kingdom of God (Luke 16.16). It was for the widespread preaching of the good news of the Kingdom that He had been sent (Luke 4.43). His casting out of devils by the Spirit of God was evidence that the Kingdom of God had come upon them (Matthew 12.28). He promised the Kingdom to the poor in spirit and to those persecuted for righteousness' sake (Matthew 5.3.10). He Himself 'went about through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good tidings of the Kingdom' (Luke 8.1), and having given the twelve and the seventy authority over sickness and demons, He sent them out to preach the Kingdom of God (Luke 9.1–2; 10.1–16, esp. vv.9,11). On the first Palm Sunday the crowds cried: 'Hosanna; Blessed (is) he that cometh in the name of the Lord: Blessed is the kingdom that cometh, (the kingdom) of our father David: Hosanna in the highest.' (Mark 11.10) The Kingdom came near when the King came; proclaiming the Kingdom was at the centre of His public ministry.

(b) It is a Present, *Spiritual Kingdom*

The casting out of demons pointed to the arrival of the Kingdom (Matthew 12.28), which is the present possession of those with a certain attitude of soul, poverty of spirit (Matthew 5.3) and of those persecuted for righteousness' sake (Matthew 5.10). The rest of the Sermon on the Mount makes it clear that life in the Kingdom consists of spiritual perceptions and attitudes that lead to conduct pleasing to God. The Kingdom of God may not be observed by external things; it is a hidden, spiritual reality: 'The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo, here! or, There! for lo, the kingdom of God is within you.' (Or 'in the midst of you'—Luke 17.20–21) The Kingdom and its righteousness are to be sought now (Matthew 6.33). It is 'not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost' (Romans 14.17). It is not a kingdom of this world; its servants do not fight to defend the King with the weapons of human warfare (John 18.36–37). In the parables of the leaven and the mustard seed the Kingdom is a hidden reality in this present age, possessing a secret power of growth from within. Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler equates entry into the kingdom of God with inheriting eternal life (Mark 10.17,23). The kingdom is the sphere where God's forgiveness is experienced and where forgiveness is shown to others—such is the meaning of the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18.23–35). It is a spiritual kingdom which defeats the kingdom of Satan: 'If I by the Spirit of God cast out devils, then is the Kingdom of God come upon you.' (Matthew 12.25–28)

(c) The Conditions of Entry Reveal the Kingdom to be the Sphere of Salvation

This spiritual nature of the kingdom is nowhere seen more clearly than in the conditions of entry into it. Both John the Baptist and Jesus announced the imminence of the Kingdom with a call to repentance, showing—to the great surprise of their hearers—that entry was not by Jewish parentage but by a spiritual change of heart (Matthew 3.2; 4.17). The kingdom is entered by conversion: 'Verily I say unto you, Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven.' (Matthew 18.3) A self-humbling is necessary (Matthew 18.4). Trust in riches must be abandoned (Mark 10.24–25). Real, not merely verbal, obedience is a condition—the parable of the two sons is about entry into the kingdom (Matthew 21.28–32). There must be poverty of spirit before God (Matthew 5.3). The knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom is given by divine revelation (Matthew 13.11; 16.17; 11.25–27). It can only be seen and entered through the New Birth, the sovereign regenerating work of God's Spirit (John 3.3,5). It is a supernatural, spiritual Kingdom, the gift of the Father's grace to the Son's disciples (Luke 12.32).

(d) Life in the Kingdom

The Sermon on the Mount describes the life in this spiritual Kingdom. The Beatitudes give the rest of the teaching a 'Kingdom' context (Matthew 5.3,10), and the theme of the Kingdom recurs throughout: Matthew 5.19,20; 6.10,33; 7.21. Jesus' teaching here makes it clear that life in the kingdom is essentially spiritual; the attitudes taught and the righteousness required are beyond the desire, let alone the achievement, of the natural man. They are given to members of the Kingdom as a gift of sovereign grace. Life in the Kingdom is clearly described in the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18.21–35); it is all to do with the receiving of forgiveness from God and the showing of forgiveness to others because we have been forgiven so much; such an attitude and actions towards others are only possible to those who have experienced the forgiveness of sins through the grace of Christ. By implication, the basis of this supernatural life of the Kingdom is His saving work on the Cross. In the passage about the keys of the Kingdom (Matthew 16.17–19) the Church, viewed as a house having keys, is placed parallel with the Kingdom, the sphere of salvation, whose doors may be unlocked to repentant sinners, but locked against unbelievers.

(e) The Future Consummation of the Kingdom

The parables in Matthew 13 reveal the present nature and future consummation of the Kingdom. In the parable of the Sower (Matthew 13.3–9, 18–23) the seed is the 'word of the kingdom' (v.19); the Kingdom is established through the sowing of the Word of God *and* through revelation given by God (vv.11ff.). Teaching and proclaiming the living and abiding Word of God is the one thing that man can do, apart from pray, to extend the Kingdom of God. The sons of the Kingdom and the sons of the evil one will live alongside one another in the world until the great harvest: God will sort things out at the Judgment (Matthew 13.24–30,36–43). The parable of the Net also speaks of future judgment and of the final establishment of the Kingdom in its perfect form in eternity (Matthew 13.47–50). That which is seen in the picture of the mustard seed and the leaven to have secret beginnings, becomes evident to us through spiritual growth in this present age, and will find its consummation through a climactic act of God on the Great Day (Matthew 13.31–35). When Christ has defeated the last enemy, death, He shall deliver up the Kingdom to God, having abolished all other rule and authority and power (1 Cor.15.24–28). Then the eternal Kingdom will dawn—that state which the prophets described so vividly using earthly pictures.

The parables of the Wedding Banquet and the Great Feast (Matthew 22.1–14; Luke 14.15–24) point to the great eschatological feast for all God's redeemed people. It is the feast to be enjoyed by the Old and New Testament saints (Matthew 8.11; Luke 13.28–30). It is the feast where, after the Last Supper, the Lord Jesus will

drink of the fruit of the vine with His disciples (Matthew 26.29; Mark 14.24–25). It is the Wedding Feast of the Lamb (Revelation 19.7,9).

In conclusion, we may say that the Kingdom of God is a complex but definite concept. It is both present and future. Its mystery has been revealed by God to His people in this present age. Its future glorious consummation will be seen by all men at the coming of Christ and the Day of Judgment, when the new heaven and the new earth will appear. In this age the Kingdom is established through the preaching and the believing of the Word of God. It is spiritual in nature, accomplished through God's election and grace, and by His work of revelation and regeneration in the human soul. Its consummation in eternity will be brought about by God. It is a spiritual kingdom—from beginning to end the work of GOD.

4. Some Observations about the Nature of the Kingdom

Before proceeding to practical application of the Biblical teaching about the Kingdom of God, it is necessary to clarify some points where there can be confusion. This process of clarification in itself will point the way forward to application.

(a) The Kingdom and the Church

We can do no better than quote Louis Berkhof's Comment on the Kingdom of God (*Systematic Theology*, page 409):

It is closely related to the Church, though not altogether identical with it. The citizenship of the kingdom is co-extensive with the membership of the invisible church. Its field of operation, however, is wider than that of the Church, since it aims at the control of life in all its manifestations. The visible Church is the most important, and the only divinely instituted, external organisation of the kingdom. At the same time it is also the God-given means *par excellence* for the extension of the kingdom of God on earth. It is well to note that the term 'kingdom of God' is sometimes employed in a sense which makes it practically equivalent to the visible Church, Matthew 8.12; 13.24–30, 47–50.

(b) Different Aspects of the Kingdom

There are certain phrases occasionally used by theologians which can assist our understanding of how God the King rules and of what the 'kingdom of God' means in a particular context:

i. The Kingdom of Power

By this is meant the rule of God and of Christ over the whole universe. We are thinking of His providential rule of all things for the benefit of the Church. All the earth is His, and He rules over it in order to bring His elect people to Himself, as we have already seen in Exodus 19.3–6. God controlled the affairs of all the heathen nations, but always in relation to Israel—either to bless or to punish His own

people. Similarly, God rules in power over the affairs of the world today for the benefit of the Church. God gave Christ 'to be head over all things to the church' (Eph.1.22). On the basis of this Kingdom of Power the Church of Christ can confidently pray for God to act on her behalf.

ii. *The Kingdom of Grace*

This is that which is set up by a work of God's grace in the hearts of believers in this present age.

iii. *The Kingdom of Glory*

This is the future glorious Kingdom to be established by God Himself at the Second Coming of Christ and after the Judgment Day. In this Kingdom there will be no rebellion, no sin and no sadness. It is the certain hope of sharing in this Kingdom that is the great motive for Christian perseverance in this life.

There is clearly a relationship between the Kingdom of Grace and the Kingdom of Glory, the former being the beginning of the latter, and the latter being that to which we aspire while we enjoy the former. Thomas Watson, with characteristic pithiness, observes: 'The Kingdom of Grace is glory in the seed; the Kingdom of Glory is grace in the flower. . . . The Kingdom of Grace is glory militant; the Kingdom of Glory is grace triumphant.'

It only remains to be said that the New Testament phrases about the Kingdom of God refer usually to the Kingdom of Grace and Glory, rather than directly to the Kingdom of Power.

(c) **Contemporary 'Kingdom Theology'**

This is a comparatively modern development. The emphasis is placed very much on the Kingdom as the 'rule' of God, rather than as the realm or sphere of salvation. It is seen not only as God's rule over His elect people, but also over human society and the world in general. The Church's task is therefore seen to be establishing the rule, or Kingdom of God, in these two spheres:

i. *In the church*, by the preaching of the Gospel, the gathering of people into the community where God rules, the saving of sinners and the sanctification of saints.

ii. *In the world*, by establishing God's rule through social and political reform. It is self-evident that righteousness in a nation's life is pleasing to God, so that this is what the Christian and the Church should aim for directly, as well as seeking to win people for Christ.

This 'kingdom theology' is used to argue from Scripture for 'mission' with a twofold aim:

1. The conversion of sinners.
2. The task of social reform, material care.

The difficulty is that these are not stated in Scripture to be the aims of the Gospel, of the saving work of Christ or of the Kingdom in this present age. Christ Jesus came into the world with one aim—to save sinners and make possible the ingathering of the elect into God's

Kingdom. The reformation of society is not seen as the primary aim, but as the inevitable *result* when the Christian leaven (a significant minority of believers in society) has its effect.

'Kingdom theology' is linked with the view that Jesus came to oppose *directly* the world's system and institutions. Jim Punton expressed it this way at the Anglican Evangelical Assembly in January 1982:

As messiah he was in direct collision with the world's system and *values*. Jesus is a king who came not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many; his way was to suffer rather than inflict suffering; to put others before self; to forgive and love enemies; to affirm the marginalized; to repudiate domination and oppression, to set aside greed and possession, to share and cooperate, to give respect and regard to the outcast and poor, to champion women and children, to expose the idolatries of success, status, security, power. He challenged custom, tradition, law and institutions; he attacked the economic power of the temple and its aristocratic terrorists; he ignored Herod and was non-cooperative before the legal system . . . There was no doubt what the social stand of the Messiah was. Discipleship meant sharing it and living it out . . .

There is much truth here, but there is a great deal of false argumentation. Jesus, like Paul after Him, did *not* do things which by implication Jim Punton suggests He did—He did not urge the Jews to throw off the Roman yoke; He did not tell slaves to run away, or slave-owners to free their slaves. His motives were other than Jim Punton would suggest at certain points—He threw the traders out of the Temple for spiritual reasons (because it was a House of Prayer) and not to undermine the economic power of the Sadducees (of that motive there is no mention). He was silent at His trial, not as a protest against the injustice of the legal process, but in fulfilment of prophecy concerning Himself and in order to achieve the salvation of sinners in obedience to His Father's eternal decree. We must *accept* the motives revealed in Scripture, rather than *infer* different motives from the situation in which Jesus found Himself. Jim Punton omits to mention that Christ came to save sinners!

Contemporary 'kingdom theology' is so complex and diffuse that it is not possible within the scope of this paper to examine its origins in detail, nor to attempt to trace its development. Nevertheless, it is perhaps helpful to mention some features of it which point to contemporary parallels and historical antecedents:

i. *The Old Testament is allowed to interpret the New*

The correct biblical procedure is to use the New Testament to show us the real significance of the Old. Using this correct methodology what appeared in the Old Testament to have a purely earthly meaning, is seen by the way it is quoted and applied in the New Testament to be spiritual and eternal; thus, the river flowing

from the Temple in Ezekiel 47 might be thought of as a prophecy of perfection on earth, but Revelation 22 makes it clear that the fulfilment of this prophecy occurs in the eternal realm, the new heaven and the new earth after the Judgment, and not in any earthly millennium—Ezekiel, probably not understanding the full significance of his vision from God (1 Peter 1.10–12), was using earthly terms to describe eternal realities. If the opposite procedure is used and Old Testament prophecy is made the key for understanding New Testament eschatological statements, the result is an earthly, materialistic view of the millennium. ‘Kingdom theology’ does something similar when, for example, the literal meaning in Isaiah 61.1–2, read aloud by Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4.18–19), is used to determine the nature of Jesus’ mission—a bias towards the materially poor, the physical prisoners—rather than to see from Jesus’ own teaching that what *seemed* to be earthly in the Old Testament was in fact a picture of His *spiritual* mission. The sermon on the Mount and the parables of the Kingdom are the correct guide to an understanding of the Old Testament material.

ii. *In establishing doctrine too much emphasis is placed on narrative passages*

There is a tendency to make an arbitrary selection of biblical texts for study, not a selection that reflects the teaching and the thrust of the whole of Scripture. In particular, the narrative parts of Scripture are sometimes given too much prominence. Just as the *events* of the Acts of the Apostles can be overstressed in establishing a theology of Baptism or of the gifts of the Spirit, so the incidents in the Gospels can be wrongly used in seeking to understand the purpose of Jesus’ ministry and saving work. Observing that He both preached *and* healed, ‘kingdom theology’ has wrongly deduced that both these elements were included in His *aim*. It is misleading to draw conclusions from the *events* of the Gospels alone, instead of learning from the clear *statements* of the whole of Scripture. Much trouble is caused by taking doctrine from selected events rather than from the obviously didactic passages of Scripture.

iii. *There are affinities between ‘kingdom theology’ and ‘liberation theology’*

Both present a view of Christianity which, compared with the faith of the New Testament, is ‘this-worldly’ and materialistic. Both tend to accept the events of the Bible, but not always the interpretation placed on those events by Scripture itself. Thus, for ‘liberation theology’, the Exodus is seen solely as national deliverance for Israel and the justification for political liberation and social reform as the primary Christian duty today—but this view gives no heed to the Bible’s interpretation of the Exodus as the saving act of God, bringing His chosen people to Himself and providing a type for the saving work of Christ on the Cross. ‘Kingdom theology’ and

'liberation theology' both have parallels with Marxist philosophy which sees history as political and class conflict and seeks to establish a purely earthly Utopia. To varying degrees, and sometimes unknowingly, theologians of these two schools have allowed this Marxist 'Weltanschauung' to be a guiding principle for interpreting Scripture. Their theology can therefore be Biblical revelation interpreted by worldly philosophy rather than by the rest of Scripture and by the principles of interpretation used in Scripture itself.

iv. *Biblical terms can be used with a non-Biblical emphasis*

One example of this is the shift of emphasis from the Kingdom as the sphere of salvation and the rule of God, to one which focusses almost entirely upon His rule. The kingdom of God becomes confused with the sovereignty of God, the Kingdom of Grace with the Kingdom of Power. We may be left with the view of a God whose rule is increased over His creation by social reforms brought about by men, and of a God who only rules where justice exists. Such an idea or tendency is totally foreign to the sovereign Ruler of the Universe revealed in Scripture who, while not the Author of evil, rules over good and evil and uses them both for His righteous ends, notably for the spiritual good of His people. The erroneous shift seems to have come about by the arbitrary seizing upon one aspect of truth, the Kingdom as God's rule, and restricting the meaning of the Kingdom to this one element, or giving this aspect a much more prominent part than is warranted by Scripture.

Preach the Gospel, let the Kingdom grow mysteriously in God's way set forth in Scripture—and there will be *real* social impact!

(d) **The Righteousness of the Kingdom**

Difficulties sometimes arise about the righteousness that belongs to the Kingdom of God. It is *not* simply a matter of outward behaviour, or national laws and the administration of justice based upon Scriptural principles, or of an equitable and caring society, pleasing though all these things are to God. Our study of the life of members of the Kingdom reveals that their righteousness is deeper than any of these things—in behaviour it springs from a new heart given by God; in standing it is the righteousness of Christ credited to the believing sinner. It is a righteousness from God, given of His grace to His own people. Such righteousness is not extended by social reform, or educational and medical programmes, building projects, and the like. It will only come about through the preaching of the Word and the secret outworking of God's eternal purpose until that Day when all the righteous in His sight shall be gathered into His Kingdom of Glory.

(e) **The Kingdom—and the Effects of the Kingdom**

There is another problem, the confusion in some people's minds between the Kingdom itself and the effects of the Kingdom. Let us take the example of the current Anti-Abortion Campaign and its relation to the Kingdom:

- i. The Kingdom of God consists of the people of God, the redeemed, the elect, under the rule of Christ, dwelling in the sphere of salvation, acting as salt and light in the world.
- ii. Campaigning against wrong abortion by believers is an *effect* of the Kingdom. It establishes standards pleasing to God, helps avert His judgment from the nation. But it does not, in itself, extend the Kingdom. You do not enter the Kingdom, present or future, simply by compliance with God's requirements in one area of life.
- iii. Campaigning against abortion by non-Christians has nothing directly to do with the Kingdom of God, except that it *may* be inspired, indirectly, by the lives and attitudes of members of the Kingdom. Such campaigning is not within the Kingdom, nor does it extend the Kingdom of God, right and necessary though it is.

In this connexion we would do well to distinguish, as Luther did, between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. The former is spiritual, the latter is social; the former is where God's rule is accepted, forgiveness is received and shown, and evil is conquered by God's grace; the latter is where Satan rules, and where evil must be restrained by strict justice and, where necessary, by the sword. The *effects* of the Kingdom of God can be seen in the kingdom of the world. The members of God's kingdom are commanded to love their neighbour in their different spheres of life in the kingdom of this world. They do this only because they themselves are in His Kingdom and their lives of love only *extend* that Kingdom when others are prompted by the witness of their lives to respond to the Gospel themselves. Thus the Kingdom of God grows in the world when He delivers men out of Satan's kingdom and out of darkness, translating them into the Kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have our redemption and the forgiveness of our sins (Colossians 1.13).

(f) **'Holistic' Theology**

The development of 'holistic' theology can affect our understanding of the Kingdom of God. This view regards Christ's saving work as *one*—the reclamation of the universe from evil. As Jim Punton said at the Anglican Evangelical Assembly, January 1982:

The universe that the Creator designed was a cosmos of love, inter-relation, interdependent harmonious and whole; everything, every structure, every being brought him delight. But evil wrecked creation, bringing disintegration, disunity, decay and death. God's love reached out in mission and his heart devised the means to restore creation to his intention. 'God so loved the cosmos that he gave his only son.' Through his death and resurrection God's grace provided his way to reclamation and reconstitution of the universe. Every unresponsive thing, structure and person will be eradicated; injustice, greed, disease, hunger—all that make for death and finally death itself will be destroyed. The new creation in 'new heavens and new earth' will manifest freely the KINGDOM OF GOD. (Rev. 21.1-5; Isaiah 65.17;

Rom. 8.21; Isaiah 11.6-9). The kingdom of God, even when experienced now, is the kingdom of the future.

Note how everything has become one—the two-stage Scriptural view of the entry of evil (man's rebellion followed by the spread of evil into the natural creation) has become simply 'evil wrecked creation'. Similarly, the redemption of the universe has become a single event, rather than the consequence of the redemption of sinful mankind. Gone is the longing of the creation expressed in Romans 8.19: 'For the earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the revealing of the sons of God.'

5. Conclusion: The Kingdom of God and Mission

(a) How the Kingdom comes

We have already established from the New Testament that the Kingdom of God is extended by sowing the seed of the Word of God. It grows by the secret operation of the Holy Spirit in this age, to be consummated at the end of time by God's direct action. The Westminster Larger Catechism (Question 191) states:

In the second petition (which is, Thy Kingdom Come), acknowledging ourselves and all mankind by nature under the dominion of sin and Satan, we pray that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed, the gospel propagated throughout the world, the Jews called, the fulness of the Gentiles brought in, the church furnished with all gospel-officers and ordinances, purged from corruption countenanced and maintained by the civil magistrate; that the ordinances of Christ may be purely dispensed, and made effectual to the converting of those that are yet in their sins, and the confirming, comforting and building up of those that are already converted; that Christ would rule in our hearts here, and hasten the time of his second coming, and our reigning with him for ever; and that he would be pleased so to exercise the kingdom of his power in all the world, as may best conduce to these ends.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it succinctly (Question 102):

In the second petition (which is, Thy Kingdom Come), we pray, That Satan's kingdom may be destroyed; and that the kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it, and kept in it; and that the kingdom of glory may be hastened.

Luther said similarly in his Gospel Sermon, Twentieth Sunday after Trinity:

Such a divine kingdom can be governed, built up, protected, extended and maintained only by means of the external office of the Word and of the Sacraments, through which the Holy Spirit is powerful and works in the hearts etc., as I have often said in speaking on this theme.²

b) How to extend the Kingdom of God

It follows that this will come by preaching the Word and using the means of grace given by God for the conversion of sinners and the sanctification of saints. As it is a spiritual kingdom, so its methods and weapons are entirely spiritual—and not political and social:

i. *Evangelism is primary.* The biblical understanding of the Kingdom of God as the sphere of salvation, established by God's rule, teaches the necessity of being in that Kingdom if we are to be saved. It also reminds us that, apart from the worship and glory of God, the primary objective of the Church and of the individual Christian is to proclaim the Gospel in obedience to Christ's great commission (Matthew 28.16–20).

ii. *The Word of God is central.* Not only is it the means by which His purpose is achieved in the world (Isaiah 55.9–11), it is the seed which must be sown in men's hearts so that they might be born again and become members of God's kingdom (Matthew 13.1–9, 18–23; 1 Peter 1.22–25). It is milk for spiritual babies (1 Peter 2.2–3) and solid food for mature Christians (Hebrews 5.12–14).

iii. *Salvation is the sovereign work of God.* Entry to the Kingdom is by the New Birth. God is the One who justifies (Romans 8.33) and He is the One who gives the new heart, making sinners to share in the divine nature (John 3.3,5; Ezekiel 36.26–27; Jeremiah 31.31–34; 2 Peter 1.4). Evangelism is sowing the seed of God's Word so that through the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration God's elect come to salvation. It is *God* who builds His kingdom (Daniel 2.44–45). We know that what He builds will last, and that one day His kingdom will fill the whole earth. As a result we can do our part with persevering labour and confident faith—sowing the seed of the Word, and calling upon God in prayer.

iv. *Evangelism is in the context of God's judgment.* The future Day of Judgment is pictured in several of the Kingdom parables in Matthew 13, and is the background to the parables of the ten virgins (Matthew 25.1–13), the talents (Matthew 25.14–30) and of the pounds (Luke 19.11–27). Men and women do not need to be saved simply from themselves or from selfishness, nor just from the natural consequences of their sin and foolishness; we preach the Gospel so that sinners may be saved from the judgment of God. The Kingdom speaks of the holiness of God and of the reality of His just judgment of all men.

v. *The righteousness of the Kingdom depends on the indwelling Spirit of God.* The righteousness depicted in the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, can only be understood and sought by those born again of the Spirit of God. The task of the Church and her ministers is to promote this spiritual righteousness, praying for it, teaching the people of God from Scripture what it demands, and pointing them to their resources in Christ and His Spirit.

vi. *The present work of the Kingdom is in the light of the marriage feast of the Lamb.* God has invited His people to an eternal feast (Luke 14.15–24; Matthew 22.1–14; Revelation 19.6–9), and He uses the means of grace and the experiences of this life to call us to that feast and to prepare us to *enjoy* it. His aim is to make us holy, so that we shall be worthy guests and shall not find the holiness of our heavenly environment too great a shock. His desire is that our spiritual fellowship with Himself on earth should be a foretaste of the sabbath rest in heaven. We are to be Christ-centred in our lives now, because in heaven everything will focus upon the throne of God and upon the Lamb. Our present life has one purpose from God's point of view—to prepare us for that feast. And through us He constantly sends out His invitation to others to come to the great banquet that He has spread.

(c) How to extend the social impact of the Kingdom of God

The debate is not about the rightness or necessity of Christian social involvement, for on that all are agreed. The question is simply about the relation of this to the Kingdom of God. The thesis of this paper is that social impact, which is not part of the Kingdom itself but the inevitable effect of the Kingdom, will come about initially by extending the Kingdom of God itself. This is the sovereign work of God, in which man's part is the proclamation and application of God's Word, and prayer. It will also come about through members of the Kingdom *really* living the righteous life of the kingdom, which is not simply adopting an outward life-style, however simple and commendable that may be, but living the Kingdom life of heart-fellowship with God in the midst of the kingdom of this world. Such a deepening of *spiritual* life comes through scriptural instruction, prayer and the reviving work of the Spirit of God. The more true believers there are, and the more they are living this secret, inner life of the Kingdom, living as citizens of heaven while here on earth, the greater will be the impact of the leaven, the salt and the light in society. The stronger the spiritual Kingdom is, the greater will be the effects for good in society.

Jesus Himself did not attack directly the evil social institutions of His day, but the effect of His spiritual teaching—the growth of the Kingdom of God on earth—has led to great blessings in society. It was through Christian influence that slavery was abolished. The Reformation, a mighty movement of God's Spirit, transformed the social structure of Western Europe—it established democracy firmly amongst us, and it led to the development of science (made possible because it made sense to investigate the handiwork of a rational and wise Creator-God). The eighteenth century Revival in this country, according to eminent secular historians, spared us a blood-bath such as the French Revolution and led to massive social reforms in the following century.

Scripture teaches us that the mission of the Church, like that of her Master, is the salvation of lost sinners. Scripture and history teach us that when the Kingdom of God is extended and its spiritual life is experienced deeply by Christians, the impact for good in society is tremendous, out of all proportion to the number of Christians. Our need today is not for a greater social conscience, but for a deeper understanding of the Gospel and its implications, and for the constraining love of Christ, the King, to rule in our hearts (2 Cor. 5.14). We need His yearning for the souls of the lost! We need this *spiritual reality* of the Kingdom to burn in our souls!

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NOTES

- 1 See: Article 'BASILEIA' in Arndt & Gingrich; Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom and the Church*, (Eerdmans, 1958)—pages 21–26.
- 2 See also his Larger and Small Catechism, and his Gospel Sermon, Twenty-secondth Sunday after Trinity.

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- 4 Louis Berkhof: *Systematic Theology*—pp. 406–412 (Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh).
- 5 Charles Hodge: *Systematic Theology* Volume 2, pp. 596–609—'The Kingly Office of Christ'. (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids).
- 6 John Calvin: *Institutes* Book 3, Chapter 20, Para. 42—'Thy Kingdom Come'; Book 3, Chapter 3, Para. 19; Book 2, Chapter 16, Paras. 16–17; Book 3, Chapter 19, Para. 15.
- 7 Hugh J. Kerr: *A Compend of Luther's Theology* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1966) pp. 205–206—quote from Larger Catechism and Small Catechism; pp. 206–208—quotes from Gospel Sermons (Trinity 20 and 22); pp. 213–216—Luther's teaching on the 'two kingdoms' in quotations about 'The Christian and the State'.
- 8 DR. J. A. E. Vermaat: *Evangelicals and Social Ethics* (International Christian Network, Abingdon).
- 9 George Eldon Ladd: *The Gospel and the Kingdom* (Eerdmans Grand Rapids, 1959, reprinted 1981).
- 10 Walter J. Chantry: *God's Righteous Kingdom* (Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh 1980).
- 11 Patrick Fairbairn: *Prophecy* (1865, reprinted by Baker Book House in 1976)—especially 'The prophetic future of the Jewish people' (pp. 236–281) and 'The prophetic future of the church and the kingdom of Christ' (pp. 282–485).