

The kingdom of God

This paper aims to do two things:

1. Explain what the kingdom of God (also called the kingdom of heaven) is.¹
2. Reflect on the implications for us.



1. What is the kingdom of God?

a. It is bigger than the church

The Church is struggling in many parts of the UK and, therefore, is tending to concentrate on how to “fix itself”. Hence, in its teaching, the Church often looks at the Epistles (New Testament letters that major on the Church) more than the Gospels and has become preoccupied with the Church instead of the kingdom. This has led to many Christians thinking the kingdom, when mentioned in the Bible, means “Church”. This is not a biblical view.

b. The kingdom in the Old Testament

Tom Wright comments that, “The most important thing to recognise about the first-century Jewish use of kingdom-language is that it was bound up with the hopes and expectations of Israel. ‘Kingdom of god’ was not a vague phrase, or a cipher with a general religious aura. It had nothing much, at least in the first instance, to do with what happened to human beings after they died. The reverent periphrasis [roundabout way of speaking] ‘kingdom of heaven’, so long misunderstood by some Christians to mean ‘a place, namely heaven, where saved souls go to live after death’, meant nothing of the sort in Jesus’ world: it was simply a Jewish way of talking about Israel’s God becoming king. And, when this God became king, the whole world, the world of space and time, would at last be put to rights.”²

When Jesus was born the Jews were still living in “exile” and they believed the coming of the kingdom would have four results: 1: God’s Messiah³ comes. 2: Roman authority is overthrown. 3: The people are led out of exile. 4: The Temple is re-established.

c. The kingdom in the New Testament

i. The incarnation of Jesus

The kingdom was ushered in when Jesus became a foetus in the womb of Mary and was born in a backwater town in occupied Israel. This is called the incarnation (embodiment of human flesh) and is a key in helping us understand the kingdom. Many Christians focus on Jesus’ death and resurrection and can forget that God’s “evangelistic strategy”, whilst including these events, was for his son to become one of us and “move into the neighbourhood”. The incarnation is the act of a God who meets people where they are and merges the “sacred” (Church) and “secular” (world) to reach them.

This act began the ushering in of the kingdom. Jesus was a living parable of it; hidden in the womb, starting out small, growing, marked by mystery, bringing joy and inviting all types to feast with him as he lived in the world for thirty-three years.



ii. Jesus’ parabolic teaching

¹ From now on the kingdom of God will be referred to as “the kingdom”

² *Jesus and the victory of God* N.T. Wright

³ “Messiah” means God’s anointed one who is chosen for a specific task

The emphasis of Jesus' teaching was (you've guessed it) the kingdom. In Matthew he mentions the Church twice⁴ and the kingdom of God fifty-five times. The main way he taught was through parables (a simple story with a deeper meaning). These parables, especially in Matthew 13, show the kingdom as any place where God's justice, forgiveness, mercy and inclusion are seen:

- The kingdom has already been planted by God before we arrive on the scene.
- The table of the kingdom feast has already been set by God.
- It is a feast/fiesta to which all are invited.
- It starts small.
- It is always growing.
- This growth is always marked by mystery.
- It is larger than, but includes the Church.
- To have the kingdom (pearl of great price) we must buy the field (world): there is no sacred/secular divide.
- It is often hidden.
- Discovering the kingdom brings joy.

d. God's theme tune

So what is the kingdom? It is God's theme tune/novel/web-page/song/poem/film/radio programme that pervades the cultures of the world and cannot be contained but is open to everyone.

2. What are the implications of the kingdom?

The kingdom was not replaced by the Church when Jesus ascended to heaven. It was still the focus of the early Church leaders such as Philip and Paul⁵ and must be ours. We, as individuals and a local church in Bessels Green must discover and focus on the kingdom. It must come before Sunday worship style, pastoral care structures, prayer meetings, etc., because it is the drama of God that he has invited us to act in.



To find this kingdom means that we must be where it is: Both within the Church and outside of it (in the surrounding culture). Jesus could have stayed "inside" the heavens but went "outside" to the world. We must embody/incarnate Jesus and, like him, merge the "sacred" and "secular". This may be difficult for some Christians who prefer things to be black and white, but this is not the kingdom way. The kingdom way involves risk. However, we can take comfort and confidence in the fact that the kingdom is already where we are and plan to go. We do not have to rustle it up and it is not reliant on our efforts because it is both a present experience and an empowering hope for the future.

In conclusion, the kingdom comes wherever God's rule (justice, forgiveness, love and inclusion) is evident. Therefore, we need to focus on advancing the kingdom through our Values (worship, team ministry, outreach, practical discipleship and youth work). Bessels Green Baptist Church is a part of the kingdom and should be a resource centre for it, not just an end in itself.

"God invites you to participate in the greatest, largest, most diverse, and most significant cause in history – his kingdom." Rick Warren (The purpose- driven life)

⁴ Matthew 16:18-20 and 18:15-20

⁵ Acts 8:12, 19:8, 20:25 and 20:28