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THE KINGDOM OF GOD – NEGLECTED PERSPECTIVE

By Wallace Benn

Evangelicals have rediscovered the preaching emphasis of the Lord himself as he loved to speak of the kingdom of God. It was a way of gospel preaching that emphasized the rule of God in the lives of men and brought out the 'now and not yet' elements of Christian hope. The kingdom of God is where he rules, and to see that clearly is to deliver us from unbiblical gospel preaching that offers Jesus as Saviour without seeing that he needs to be Lord too!

But along with this rediscovery of synoptic gospel teaching there is a potentially dangerous tendency which seems to be raising its ugly head. What is the relationship between the kingdom of God and social action? Surely to do social work is to extend the kingdom, we are told. It is to let the concerns and standards of Jesus change our society. But is this *extending* the kingdom? This was a question in the minds of a number of people at the Anglican Evangelical Assembly this year.

In order to clear our minds, let us look at Mark 1, which tells us so much about the preaching and living out of the kingdom in the life of Jesus.

The nature of the kingdom

Mark tells us that the gospel of the kingdom is not about things but about a person (v. 1). It is the good news about Jesus Christ the Son of God. Furthermore, the kingdom is the place where there is forgiveness of sins (cf. vv. 4, 15), and where the rule of God is recognized. It is thus, first of all, a place where grace is received to forgive, through repentance and faith (v. 15). And secondly, the acknowledgement of the rule of God, by the citizens of the kingdom who repent, results in the standards of the King being theirs too.

So you cannot be in the kingdom without repentance and faith, and submission to the rule of God. This message of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed (v. 14). To talk about 'extending the kingdom' without gospel preaching and response to that challenging proclamation, is to use *very* unwise language. The kingdom cannot be extended in the lives of men without conversion! So the kingdom is essentially a spiritual reality furthered by gospel proclamation.

The priority of the King

In the life and ministry of Jesus you see the standards of the King worked out in practice. Jesus exemplifies the kingdom. He taught as one having authority (vv. 17, 22), and this extended to power over evil spirits (v. 27). Furthermore he had power to heal the sick (vv. 29-34), and he preached (v. 14) with great authority and urgency.

In the life of Jesus, social action and evangelism were partners, not enemies—and so it should be for us as citizens of the kingdom. Jesus is showing us that the future consummation will be so great when he returns—there will be no pain or sickness or evil for members of the kingdom to endure then! And now, while we await his return, our concerns must be the same as our Lord. We must work for the standards of the kingdom in our society with all our hearts. Indeed evangelical lack of concern for social justice has *sometimes* been a scandal!

But notice verse 38! How very striking this is! In the concern which Jesus had for the whole man, he had a priority. In the demands of daily living, we too have to get our priorities clear. For Jesus that was preaching. Indeed, fundamentally Jesus was a preacher—That is why I have come' (v. 38). Now isn't that instructive!

The church, as members of the kingdom, must exemplify the standards of the King and seek to mirror his gracious concerns. We must try to keep his concerns in partnership as he did, but we must also be clear as to our priority when we have to choose. It is evangelism! That was the priority of Jesus, and it must be ours too. For *that* is how the kingdom is extended.

In our new concern for social responsibility, as evangelicals we are rediscovering a lost balance—a balance seen in the life of Jesus. But let us not lose sight of our primary responsibility as servants of the King; otherwise we may prove to be less faithful to the will of the King than the generations before us whom we criticize!

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