
The Kingdom of God

As Described In Holy Scripture

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The terms kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven are frequently found in Holy Scripture and in contemporary Christian usage. Yet there is widespread disagreement on the meaning and application of the terms. Some of this disagreement is a simple matter of interpretation on minor points, but some of it is crucial, challenging even the fundamental tenets of traditional evangelical and Pentecostal beliefs. For this reason it is appropriate to articulate those essential aspects of the kingdom of God that are commonly held by the Assemblies of God.

Linguistic Meaning of the term Kingdom

The primary meaning of *malkuth* (Hebrew) and *basileia* (Greek) is the authority, reign, or rule of a king. The territory, subjects, and operations of the Kingdom are secondary meanings.

The kingdom of God is the sphere of God's rule (cf. Psalm 22:28). Yet fallen man participates in the universal rebellion against God and His authority (1 John 5:19, Revelation 11:17-18). By faith and obedience man turns from his rebellion, is regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and becomes a part of the Kingdom and its operation. Though human participation in the Kingdom is voluntary, God's kingdom is present, whether or not people recognize and accept it.

There is only one kingdom of God, variously described in Scripture as the "kingdom of heaven," "kingdom of God," "kingdom of the Son of Man" (Matthew 13:41), "kingdom of the Son" (Luke 22:30), "kingdom of Jesus" (Revelation 1:9), "kingdom of Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 4:1), "kingdom of Christ and God" (Ephesians 5:5), and "kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ" (Revelation 11:15).

The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament

"Kingdom of the Lord" occurs once in the Old Testament: *malkuth Yahweh* (1 Chronicles 28:5). There are of course many occurrences of "kingdom" for earthly territory or domain. "Dominion" or "rule" is occasionally the translation for the idea of God's authority and power (Psalms 22:28, 45:6, 66:7, 103:19, 145:11-13; 1 Chronicles 17:14, 29:11). Throughout the Old Testament (but especially in the Psalms and the prophets) the idea of God as King ruling over His creation and over Israel is clearly expressed. Although God's immediate kingship is evident in the Old Testament, there is also a strong emphasis on a future fulfillment of God's universal rule. This anticipation often coincides with messianic expectations associated with both the first and second advents (cf. Isaiah 9:6-7, 11:1-12, 24:21-23, 45:22-23; Zechariah 14:9). Daniel 4:34 describes God's rule as "an everlasting dominion" and a "kingdom [that] is from generation to generation."

The Kingdom in the New Testament

While the idea of the universal rule of God permeates the Old Testament, the kingdom of God takes on additional meaning and importance in the teaching and ministry of Jesus. The ministry of Jesus begins with the proclamation, "The kingdom is at hand" (Matthew 3:2, 4:17; Mark 1:15). Although Jesus never specifically defined the Kingdom, He illustrated it through parables (Matthew 13; Mark 4) and

demonstrated its power in His ministry. He instructed His disciples to proclaim the Kingdom as He sent them out in missionary ministry (Matthew 10:7; Luke 9:2, 10:9, 10:11). Every description of Jesus Christ as Lord is a reminder that Christ is the ruler of the kingdom of God.

From the various contexts of the word kingdom in the Gospels, the rule of God is seen as (1) a present realm or sphere into which people are entering now and (2) a future apocalyptic order into which the righteous will enter at the end of the age.

Thus the kingdom of God is both a present reality and a promise of a future fulfillment. The Kingdom is already present on earth in the person and acts of Jesus, by the Holy Spirit. Yet the fullness of the Kingdom awaits a final apocalyptic arrival at the end of this age (Matthew 24:27, 30-31; Luke 21:27-31).

The State of the Kingdom Now

Just as some who followed Jesus "thought that the kingdom should immediately appear" (Luke 19:11), some today are expecting Christians to usher in the fullness of the Kingdom in an earthly rule. When the Pharisees asked Jesus at what time the kingdom of God would come, he answered, "The kingdom of God is within [among] you" (Luke 17:21). The restored reign of God was soon to be a reality, for the One who was to reclaim the usurped territory was on earth to accomplish His work of redemption. The overthrow of Satan's dominion had already begun. Today, the redemptive work is complete, yet the reality of the ultimate Kingdom is qualified. In the present age, the power of the Kingdom does not halt the aging or death process. Though God does overrule natural laws by sovereign act or in response to the prayer and faith of believers, the Kingdom still works through fallible human beings. The Church will not finally change the world prior to the Second Coming. Righteous political and social actions are important, but the main thrust of the Kingdom is the spiritual transformation of individuals who make up the body of Christ. The millennium and the ultimate expression of the Kingdom will not come without the physical return of Jesus Christ to the earth (Luke 21:31). The Kingdom is already present, but not yet complete. It is both present and future.

The interim between the first and second advents of Christ (the present age) is marked by violent confrontation between the power of the Kingdom and the power that dominates the world in this present age. Divine conflict with the demonic characterizes the present era. It is the era of conflict as well as the era of the Spirit. Believers must engage the forces of darkness (Ephesians 6:12).

We are not guaranteed total, instant success in this conflict. Each victory over sickness, sin, oppression, or the demonic is a reminder of the present power of the Kingdom and of the final victory to come, a victory made sure by the Resurrection. We are called to wage war against sickness, but we face the reality that not everyone we pray for gets well. We are in harmony with the purposes of God in this age as we move against sickness in every way possible; we rejoice at notable victories but are not bewildered when some are not healed. We do not surrender to the evil and the struggles of the present order; but neither do we rage against God or blame others when every request is not granted. The essence of the Spirit-energized life is to move against the forces of darkness, fully aware that total deliverance is always possible but does not come immediately in every instance (cf. Romans 8:18-23). Some of the heroes of faith (Hebrews 11; Acts 12:2; 2 Corinthians 11:23-12:10) suffered or died, having their deliverance deferred to a future time. We do not give in to the ravages of evil; we do not give up the fight. As instruments of the Kingdom in this present age, we faithfully battle against evil and suffering.

The Holy Spirit and the Kingdom of God

As Pentecostals we recognize the role of the Holy Spirit in the inauguration and on-going ministry of the Kingdom. At His baptism, Jesus was anointed with the Spirit (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22). His acts of power, energized by God's Spirit, brought healing to the sick and spiritual restoration to sinful men and women. The descent of the Spirit at His baptism was a significant point in the ministry of Jesus. "Being full of the Holy Ghost [Jesus] was led by the Spirit into the wilderness" (Luke 4:1). The working of the Spirit in the ministry of Jesus proved the presence of the Kingdom.

Jesus described the role of the Holy Spirit in the kingdom of God. As part of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, He told His disciples, "Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost" (Acts 1:5). The power of the Kingdom, so manifest in the Cross, the Resurrection, and the Ascension, was passed on to all who would be filled with the Spirit. The age of the Spirit is the age of the Church, the community of the Spirit. Through the Church the Spirit continues the Kingdom ministry of Jesus himself.

The Kingdom as a Future Reality

Biblical charismata, anointed proclamation of the Word, and confirming signs and wonders are distinguishing marks of the kingdom of God at work now. The kingdom of Satan has already been invaded by Jesus in the power of the Spirit (John 16:11; Colossians 1:13, 2:15). Yet final destruction of Satan and complete victory over all evil is part of a future eschatological consummation (Revelation 20:10).

We believe in the premillennial return of Christ before the thousand-year period described in Revelation 20. We believe that we are living in the last days of the present age; the next major fulfillment of Bible prophecy will be the Rapture, or physical removal, of the Church from the earth (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). We believe that the rapture of the Church is imminent (Mark 13:32-37), that it will take place before the Great Tribulation (1 Thessalonians 4:17-18; 5:9), and that it is the "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13) to which we look even while signs in the heavens and on earth signal the approaching end of this age (Luke 21:25-28).

The second coming of Christ includes the physical rapture of the saints followed by the visible return of Christ with His saints to reign on the earth for one thousand years (Zechariah 14:5; Matthew 24:27, 30; Revelation 1:7, 19:11-14, 20:1-6). Satan will be bound and inactive for the first time since his rebellion and fall (Revelation 20:2). This millennial reign will bring the salvation of Israel (Ezekiel 37:21-22; Zephaniah 3:19-20; Romans 11:26-27) and the establishment of universal peace (Isaiah 11:6-9; Psalm 72:3-8; Micah 4:3-4) for the first time since before the fall of man. God's rejection of Israel is not permanent. After the age of the Gentiles, God will regraft Israel into His kingdom, and "so all Israel shall be saved" (Romans 11:24-26).

The Kingdom and the Church

The kingdom of God is not the Church. Yet there is an inseparable relationship between the two. The invisible and true Church is the spiritual body of which Christ is the head (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18). It includes all who have believed, or will believe, in Christ as Savior from the Church's inception until the time God takes it out of the world.

The kingdom of God existed before the beginning of the Church and will continue after the work of the Church is complete. The Church is therefore part of the Kingdom, but not all of it. In the present age the kingdom of God is at work through the Church. When the Church has proclaimed the gospel of the Kingdom "in all the world for a witness unto all the nations" (Matthew 24:14), the drama of end-time events will begin. Finally, Christ will reign in majesty over His eternal Kingdom, which will include the church glorified.

The Kingdom of God and the Kingdoms of Earth

The kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world exist side by side at the present time. However, these kingdoms will not be one and the same until Christ returns and the kingdoms of this world become "the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ" (Revelation 11:15). The kingdom of God may operate within, but is not to be identified with, any present political system. Believers take the gospel of the Kingdom into the world so that individuals may voluntarily choose the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Although the kingdom of God is not a present political entity, the citizens of the Kingdom are responsible to exert a positive influence on their society. Though all human government is currently, to some extent, under the influence of the evil one (Daniel 10:13, 20; John 12:31, 14:30; Ephesians 6:12), the Bible teaches that government is ordained by God to maintain order and punish evildoers (Romans 13:1-7). Governmental authorities are God's servants (Romans 13:6) whether they recognize it or not. Ideals of

justice and decency found in government and society are the legacy of God's grace in the world (Romans 1:20, 2:14). Though they may be in rebellion, the kingdoms of the world are yet responsible to God and must be called to account for injustice and wickedness.

While the Bible does not give clear guidelines for Christian action in combating the social evils embedded in the structures of our society, and sincere believers will differ on the means to be employed, Christians clearly are to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13, 14). They are to be concerned about the needy (James 1:27, 2:16) and the oppressed (James 5:4-6). Filled with the Spirit, and given the opportunity to influence society, they are impelled to denounce unjust laws (Isaiah 10:1, 2) and to seek justice and goodness (Micah 6:8; Amos 5:14,15).

The kingdoms of the earth are subject to the influence of Satan (John 12:31, 14:30). Christ alone will accomplish the supernatural and cataclysmic destruction of the powers of evil (cf. Daniel 2; Revelation 19). Even the good structures of the present social and political order must ultimately come to an end in order to bring in the better rule of the Kingdom. The kingdom of God is not the blueprint for a radical cultural change based on some carnal theocratic or revolutionary agenda. Instead, it radically changes human personalities and lives. Through men and women who recognize its authority and live by its standards, the kingdom of God invades the stream of history. This process began with the first advent of the Messiah, has been advanced through the Church Age, and will be completed with the Second Coming. God's children should be in the world, but not of it (John 17:11, 14, 16). Romans 14:17 shows that the kingdom of God (God's rule in our lives) is demonstrated in and through us by "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."

Erroneous Views of the Kingdom of God

Neither positive thinking nor positive confession will change the biblical realities concerning the kingdom of God. To claim that the glory of the Kingdom to come may be realized here and now misleads and confuses sincere Christians. To offer the health and prosperity of the Kingdom to come as a recompense for simply confessing that one has them is to violate the plain meaning of Scripture. The theological claim that believers are "little gods" who can have what they desire by claiming their "divine right" is clearly contrary to biblical truth. God has promised to supply all of our needs (Philippians 4:19), but not all our material wants. Any teaching that discounts or destroys the important biblical themes of suffering, cross-bearing, and self-denial, or assumes an elitist attitude toward Christians who suffer economic deprivation is not of divine origin.

Christ urged His followers to take no thought about their basic needs because they are already known to God and will be met by divine provision (Matthew 6:25). Preoccupation with life's basic necessities indicates little faith (Matthew 6:30). How must Christ feel about those who are preoccupied with the luxuries of life? If we focus attention on material possessions as we claim the promise of receiving that for which we ask, we place "all these things" before the Kingdom we are to seek first (Matthew 6:33).

Thy Kingdom Come

Christ taught His disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10). The Kingdom is already among us in that it has invaded Satan's domain and has assured final victory. The Kingdom comes in a measure whenever a person receives Christ as Savior, is healed or delivered, or is touched in any way by the divine. Yet the future consummation of the kingdom of God--the time when all evil and rebellion will be eliminated--is the fervent hope of the Christian. So with the disciples we pray, "Thy kingdom come"--both now and when Christ returns.

The rapture of the church, the coming of Christ for His own, will set in motion the consummation and reality of the eternal completed Kingdom. The angel will declare, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). With John the beloved revelator we say, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).

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