

The Kingdom of God and the Mission of God: Part 2

by Rick Brown

Ralph Winter said “the Bible consists of a single drama: the entrance of the Kingdom, the power, and the glory of the living God in this enemy-occupied territory.”¹ Mark Driscoll writes, “At its simplest, the kingdom of God is the result of God’s mission to rescue and renew his sin-marred creation.”² Thus the mission of God is to bring people into his Kingdom and extend its blessings to those outside as well. In the first part of this article I began to frame this drama, and we examined some characteristics of the Kingdom of God. We noted that the word ‘kingdom’ would have evoked a complex web of concepts—a schema—in the minds of people living in biblical times. They were familiar with what it was like to live as a citizen in a kingdom and to have allegiance to a king, and they were expecting God to overcome sin and evil by establishing a global and eternal Kingdom in which righteousness dwells, ruled by God through his Son the Messiah.

4. Stages in the Development of God’s Kingdom

One aspect of the Kingdom of God that is different from earthly nation kingdoms is that it has stages of development. (1) It was prefigured in the nation Kingdom of Israel and was foretold by the prophets as its ideal successor. (2) God then inaugurated the Kingdom by sending Jesus his Son, the Savior-King, in whom the Kingdom was visibly present. Ridderbos wrote:

The secret of belonging to the kingdom lies in belonging to him (Mt. 7:23; 25:41). In brief, the person of Jesus as the Messiah is the centre of all that is announced in the gospel concerning the kingdom ... The kingdom is concentrated in him in its present and future aspects alike.³

(3) Since Jesus’ ascension and enthronement in heaven, the Kingdom has undergone a stage of growth under Jesus’ invisible reign that continues at the present time. (Most modern amillennialists and postmillennialists identify the millennium with this period of growth.) (4) This stage will end when Jesus returns manifestly to judge all people, eliminate dissenters, remove all evil, and “consummate” (i.e., complete and perfect) the total reign of his kingdom over all the earth. (Premillennialists identify the millennium with this stage.)

Editor’s Note: An earlier version of this article was published in the bulletin of the Asian Society for Frontier Mission, Oct–Dec, 2010. Due to its length, part one was published in the preceding issue of IJFM, where the author introduces the first three aspects of the Kingdom and Mission: the Old Testament background, the conceptual grid that characterizes this Kingdom, and the people or ecclesiae of the Kingdom.

Rick Brown is a missiologist who has been involved in outreach to the Muslim world since 1977. He has a PhD in Biblical Studies.

(5) Finally, when every evil has been eliminated and the world has been made new (1 Cor 15:22–28), the “kingdom of the world” will become “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Rev 11:15–19), also called “the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Eph 5:5), “the kingdom of their Father” (Matt 13:43), and “the age to come” (Luke 18:30; 20:35). This is commonly called “the Eternal Kingdom” (based on 2 Peter 1:11) and includes “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13). MacArthur refers to these five stages as the (1) prophesied, (2) present, (3) interim, (4) manifest, and (5) eternal stages of God’s Kingdom.⁴ It is significant to note that during the interim Kingdom, between Jesus’ ascension and his return, his throne is in heaven, as are the saints who die before his return. Paul refers to this as Christ’s “heavenly kingdom” (2 Tim 4:18).

It is common for theologians to lump the three middle stages together and describe the whole period from the inauguration of the Kingdom to its final consummation as a single development. This is variously called “the present Kingdom,” “the provisional Kingdom,” “the mediatorial Kingdom,” “the Messianic Kingdom,” “the Kingdom of Christ,” or in Western tradition, *regnum Christi*. The last stage is called “the future Kingdom,” “the final King-

dom,” “the Kingdom consummated,” and “the eternal Kingdom,” and in the Bible “the age to come,” “salvation,” and “eternal life.” It is this last stage that is frequently mentioned in the New Testament as the “hope” of the Gospel. It is important to keep in mind, however, that these are two stages of the same kingdom, named “the Kingdom of God,” which includes the very same citizens in this age and the next. This is represented in Figure 6.

Paul wrote, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor 15:19). He went on to explain, “For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (1 Cor 15:53). It is clear from the future tenses in most of the beatitudes that while the disciples of Christ have citizenship in the Kingdom and receive many blessings in its present stage, the full blessings of the Kingdom are in its future stage (Matt 5:3–12):

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Nevertheless, members of the Kingdom do have a “taste” of the blessings of the future Kingdom, especially in the fruit and gifts of the Spirit:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Gal 5:22–23)

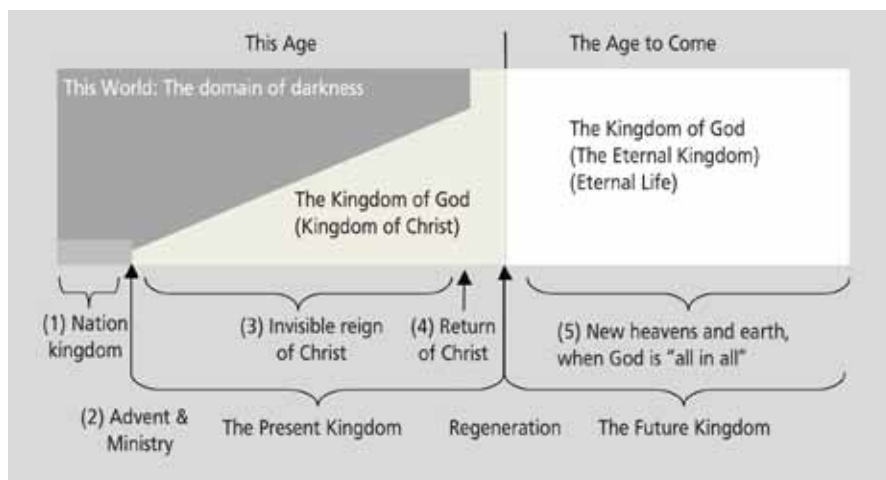
Paul describes the life we have now in the Kingdom of God as “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17).

Jesus said it was the Holy Spirit who would empower his followers to become his witnesses throughout the world (Acts 1:8). This they did in both word and deed, as Jesus had said when he commissioned them “to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:2). Ralph Winter has characterized the word and deed of ministry as “Church mission” and “Kingdom mission”:

I employ two phrases: 1) Church Mission, which I define as the winning of people into the Church wherever in the world, and thus extending the membership of the Church, and 2) Kingdom Mission, which we define as the work of the church beyond itself, going beyond Church Mission to see that His will is done on earth outside the Church.⁵

Here the word “Church” means all the people of God’s Kingdom as a community, and by “Church mission”

Figure 6: The stages of development of the Kingdom of God



Ralph Winter meant the ministry of calling people into the Kingdom as disciples of Christ. By “Kingdom mission” he meant their benevolent ministry to people and societies outside the Kingdom, in which their actions bear witness to the love and grace of God that overcomes evil. As N.T. Wright said, “If we believe it and pray, as he taught us, for God’s kingdom to come on earth as in heaven, there is no way we can rest content with major injustice in the world.”⁶

May [we] know what is the hope to which he has called [us], what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. (Eph 1:18).

5. The Good News of the Kingdom

The Old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah (Isa 40:9; 52:7), proclaimed in advance the “good news” of God’s mission. They said God was planning to establish an eternal age of perfect righteousness and blessing, and that he would do so through his special “servant” (Isa 42:1; 52:13). Isaiah described this Mediator as the very “arm” of God (Isa 40:10; 52:10), suggesting the incarnation, and as a divine and everlasting king who is like a son to God (Isa 9:6–7; Ps 2) “his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Daniel said God would establish this eternal and righteous kingdom through a heavenly figure who is “like a son of man” (Dan 7:13–14) and that it would grow to encompass all the earth (Dan 2:35). The New Testament reveals that person to be Jesus. He began his ministry by proclaiming “the Gospel of the Kingdom,” meaning the good news that God was now inaugurating his Kingdom and calling people into his Kingdom community. Jesus indicated that he is the Savior-King whom God had sent and the heavenly “son of man” whom Daniel foresaw.

Unfortunately, the people of this world are all sinners and do not qualify for a Kingdom that is free of sin and evil, but

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Jesus proclaimed the good news that people could be forgiven and become citizens of the Kingdom by repenting and believing in him. This offer is implied in his initial proclamations: Mark 1:15: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.” The phrase translated as ‘at hand’ has been explained several ways, but the one that best fits the context is that the Kingdom is now available, “within your grasp.” The statement in Luke 17:20–21 that “the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” is explained similarly by some to mean “within your reach,” meaning present in Jesus and available to you but requiring your response.⁷ More importantly, Jesus is the sacrifice of the new covenant by which it is possible for people to be accepted into the Kingdom.

Jesus entrusted his disciples with the same message (Matt 10:7; Luke 9:2, 60) to all the nations (Matt 24:14), telling them to say “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Luke 10:9), and this is what they conveyed (Acts 20:25; 28:31). They announced in Christ the inauguration of the Kingdom and the opportunity to be accepted into it as full citizens and as heirs of eternal life when the Kingdom is consummated after Christ’s return. W. F. Arndt wrote:

What is offered to those that accept Jesus the Savior and King and become citizens in that blessed realm of which He is the Ruler is not wealth, not power, not health, at least not directly. With the forgiveness of sins they have received rest for their souls, a joyful outlook upon the future, the assurance of heavenly bliss, and with this righteousness all other things will be added unto them (Matt 6:33).⁸

Jesus highlighted the gift of the Holy Spirit as a major blessing of the Kingdom (Luke 11:13).

Jesus said “this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt 24:14). That task in the mission of God was passed from Jesus to his disciples; he said, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). The mission he delegated to his followers involves more than proclamation; it involves the discipleship of people in every ethnic group: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19–20). Paul said, this involves “training” them “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,” that they might be “a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:12, 14).

Earthly kingdoms do not allow foreigners to become citizens unless they pledge loyalty to the king. Applicants who reject the king are rejected as candidates for citizenship. The same applies to the Kingdom of God: people cannot enter the Kingdom unless they accept Jesus as their King. Jesus made this fairly clear when he condemned the people of Chorazin and Bethsaida for not responding when they saw his miracles (Luke 10:13). He made it clear in a parable, when the king says on his return, “But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me” (Luke 19:27). He uttered a similar judgment against the wicked tenants in the parable of the tenants (Matt 21:33–41), and “when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about

them” (Matt 21:45). Jesus went on to make it explicit that the “son” in the parable was also the “cornerstone” of (the Messianic) Psalm 118:22, whom the (religious) builders had rejected (Matt 21:42). “Therefore I tell you,” Jesus said to the Pharisees, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it” (Matt 21:43).

Jesus gave similar warnings for those who reject the proclamation of the gospel by his disciples. He said:

And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. (Matt 10:14–15)

Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near. (Luke 10:11)

What had come near to those people but passed them by was the opportunity to enter the Kingdom of God as sons of God, brothers of Christ, and heirs of eternal life. Charles Erdman wrote, “The very essence of the Gospel becomes embodied in the promise of a place in the Kingdom for all who will repent of sin and believe in Christ.”⁹

It is evident that the mission of God is not to institute a religion but to replace this fallen and sinful world with his perfect and eternal Kingdom and to save into this glorious new world all who believe in the Savior-King whom he has sent. By their faith they are born again of God’s Spirit as children of God and become heirs of eternal life in the age to come. Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24). God’s saving mission reveals his love for humankind, and his eternal Kingdom will reveal the fullness of his love and glory, not in a new religion, but in a new world. The

future Kingdom will have no temple or religion, but will be filled with the glory of God and the Lamb, by whose light all the “nations will walk” in love and harmony (Rev 21:22–24).

The biblical words for ‘send’ usually mean to commission someone to carry out a mission. For that matter, the English words ‘mission’ and ‘commission’ come from the Latin word for ‘send.’ Clearly the sending of Jesus as the Savior-King, God’s Son the Messiah, is central to God’s mission of love. The gospel can be seen as the proclamation of both God’s Kingdom mission in Christ and God’s invitation to join the Kingdom, enjoy its present and future benefits, and be his channel



of blessing to others. Thus one cannot fully understand the gospel without also understanding the mission of God, the Kingdom of God and the role of Christ the King in that mission. These all go together and are best understood as a whole.

Jesus sent his disciples to help fulfill this mission, telling them to “go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). This requires us to inform everyone of God’s mission in Christ to save people from this fallen world, to cleanse them from sin by Christ’s death and resurrection, to sanctify them by his Holy Spirit, and to make them citizens of his kingdom and heirs of the age to come, after Christ returns in glory. For in this present Kingdom we “have tasted the heavenly

gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Heb 6:4–5), but our hope, as Paul often says, is for the glory of the age to come. This is “the hope to which he has called you” and “the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (Eph 1:18).

Paul summarizes this gospel in his letter to Titus (2:11–15a):

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. Declare these things . . .

Peter summarizes the gospel in a similar way (1 Pet 1:3–5):

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

We can praise God forever that we are among the people of God, whom he has called “into his own kingdom and glory” (1 Thess 2:12), and that God has commissioned us to extend his call to people in every ethnic group.

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:11)

6. Mysteries of the nature of the Kingdom of Christ

Many first-century Jews had great expectations of the Messiah and his kingdom. Some of them anticipated a messianic kingdom that would include

all nations (based on prophetic passages such as Isaiah 2:4; 11:10; 42:1; 52:10, 15; 55:4–5; Psalm 2:7–8; Daniel 2:44; 7:13–14). It seems, however, that most Jews of the time were expecting the Messiah to set up a Jewish state and defeat its enemies. But the kingdom that Jesus brought differed from what was generally expected, and these differences constitute what Jesus called the “mysteries of the Kingdom.” In general he taught a very different concept of the Messianic stage of God’s Kingdom from that which people expected,¹⁰ and in doing so he taught a very different concept of the Messianic King.

Jesus revealed the true nature of the Kingdom through many parables, figurative sayings, and symbolic actions.¹¹ Thus the Kingdom parables are also parables about the person and work of Jesus the Messiah, and to understand the mysteries Jesus revealed, it is helpful to know the common misconceptions that he was correcting.

The benefits of Kingdom citizenship are present now only in part, but fully in the future.

- The beatitudes (Matt 5:3–12)
- The wheat and weeds (Matt 13:1–43)
- The vineyard workers (Matt 20:1–16)
- The faithful servant (Matt 24:45–47.)

The Messiah came, not in glory, but as a servant.

- And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. (Luke 2:16)
- And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” (Matt 8:20)
- Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. (John 13:5)
- They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their

cloaks, and he sat on them. (Matt 21:7)

One becomes a citizen of the Kingdom, not by birthright as a descendant of Abraham and not by the Mosaic covenant, but by entering a new covenant of faith in Jesus as one’s Savior-King.

- “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child like a child shall not enter it.” (Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17)
- “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved” (John 10:9)

Personal regeneration is a requisite for citizenship in the Kingdom.

- Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (John 3:5)
- “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 18:3)
- And he [the king] said to him, “Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?” And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matt 22:12–13)

Most people will reject the king’s offer of citizenship in the Kingdom and will be excluded.

- For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matt 7:14)
- The sower (Matt 13:3–8, 18–23)
- The banquet (Luke 14:15–24)

Many Jews and their leaders will reject the King and be excluded from the Kingdom.

- The nobleman (Luke 19:11–27)
- The tenants (Matt 21:33–41)
- The cornerstone (Matt 21:42)
- The unfruitful fig tree (Mark 11:12–14, 20; Luke 13:6–9)
- And no one after drinking old

wine desires new, for he says, “The old is good.” (Luke 5:39)

Citizenship in the Kingdom will be offered to the lowly and to Gentiles, some of whom will accept it.

- The banquet (Luke 14:15–24)
- The two sons (Matt 21:28–32)
- The tenants (Matt 21:33–41)

The number of those who become citizens of the Kingdom will increase gradually.

- The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches. (Matt 13:31–32)
- The mustard seed and the leaven (Matt 13:31–33 and parallels)

Growth will come by divine grace.

- The growing seed (Mark 4:26–29)

Citizens of the present Kingdom may experience ill-treatment and loss rather than safety and prosperity.

- “A disciple is not above his teacher” (Matt 10:24–25).
- “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt 10:34)
- Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:27)
- So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:33)

The present Kingdom and its surpassing value are not visible to most people.

- The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened. (Matt 13:33)
- The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. (Matt 13:44)

- Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matt 13:45–46)

The King will be killed.

- The tenants (Matt 21:33–41)

The King will triumph, rising from the dead.

- The cornerstone (Matt 21:42–44)
- The sign of Jonah (Matt 12:40–42)

The King's death will bring life to many.

- Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:24)
- I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11)
- The cornerstone (Matt 21:42–44)

The King will leave, return, and judge his servants.

- The ten talents (Luke 19:12–27)
- The two servants (Matt 24:45–51)

During his absence, the King will rule, bless, and empower his people.

- The vine (John 15:1–6)

The King will not immediately destroy the unrighteous but will postpone the reckoning until the judgment day.

- Weeds among the wheat (Matt 13:24–30)
- The fishnet (Matt 13:47–50).

Judgment will be based, not on religion or claims, but on the evidence of faith in Christ as seen in love for him and his people.

- “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” (Matt 7:21)
- “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.” (Gal 5:6)

- “I will show you my faith by my works.” (James 2:18)
- “They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works.” (Titus 1:16)
- The sheep and goats (Matt 25:31–46). “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” (v. 4)
- “These trials will show that your faith is genuine ... So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.” (1 Peter 1:6–7)

One of the greatest mysteries is the suffering of the Messiah. This had been foretold in Isaiah 53 and Psalms 22, 110, and 118, but Jewish theologians expected this to occur near the completion of his conquest, not the beginning, and none of them expected him to be killed and rise again after three days.¹² Bright noted that “a Messiah King who should suffer and die was the last thing in the world that Jewish nationalism expected or wanted.”¹³ In contrast, as Matera shows, Jesus clearly understood Psalms 22 and 118 to prophesy “that the Messiah King would suffer before he inaugurated his kingdom,” and he clearly understood the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 in the same way.¹⁴

Some scholars assert that the main mystery is that the Kingdom is present in a hidden form in Jesus, who hides his kingship until his exaltation.¹⁵ The theme of Ambrozic’s book on the subject is to demonstrate that from the beginning Jesus’ kingship and kingdom were kept nearly invisible: “The present kingdom is thus a hidden kingdom, a reality which is already with us and yet is still coming, a fulfillment straining for its completion, a glory visible only to those to whom its mystery has been entrusted.”¹⁶ It should be clear, however, from the discussion above,

that there was not just one mystery about the Kingdom, whether the messiahship of Jesus or the interim stage of the Kingdom, but there were many ways in which the King and his Kingdom differed from expectations.¹⁷

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. (1 Cor 2:9–10)

7. The Kingdom of God or a conflict of religions approach

Historically, many mission endeavors have followed a conflict-of-religions paradigm that sought to extend a particular denomination or a particular religious tradition in competition with other Christian denominations and non-Christian religions. So they have promoted the distinctives of their various forms of Christian religion, such as their particular theological formulations, their form of church polity, their professional clergy, their religious calendar, their rituals, their order of worship, their denominational associations, their style of religious buildings, etc. While all of these institutions can be useful for nurturing God’s people and for advancing the Kingdom, these customs and institutional religion in general should not be viewed as ends in themselves, because the New Testament does not even mention them, much less mandate them for Kingdom communities (ecclesiae). Instead of religious rituals, it recommends kindness and purity:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:27)

In place of religious rites and rituals, the New Testament emphasizes the Kingdom of God, living “in Christ,” praising God, praying in one’s heart, and meeting together frequently as loving faith communities.

The conflict-of-religions approach assumes the Bible encourages a social struggle with the different religions and

religious groups in the world, in which people of other religions are persuaded to convert to one's own, but this is not the biblical mandate. The Bible says "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against ... the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). So the struggle is spiritual rather than social, and "conversion" is likewise spiritual rather than social, a struggle between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan (see Matt 12:26, 28). Biblical "conversion" is spiritual as well, not from one religion to another, but from the kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of God. "For he has rescued us," Paul says, "from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the Kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13 NIV). Thus the Bible represents a Kingdom perspective of God's mission, in which the goal of mission is to advance the Kingdom of God in all social groups rather than to promote one religious tradition over all others. Charles Van Engen wrote:

Thus the major question is not if one is a member within a particular religious system, even if it is a Christian tradition. Rather, the crucial issue is whether or not one relationally belongs to the person of Jesus Christ.

The ultimate question is the question of discipleship—of one's proximity to, or distance from, Jesus the Lord.¹⁸

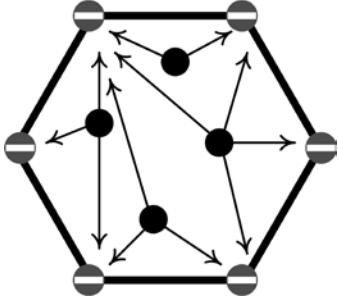
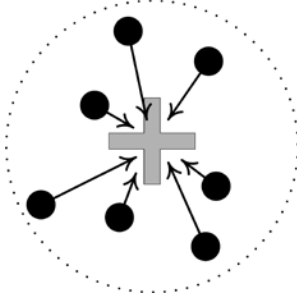
Paul encouraged fellowships (ecclesiae) of believers to grow through love and obedience to Christ's teaching. These faith communities were far different from the pagan religious institutions, which focused on temples, idols, priests, rituals, and sacrifices. They were not competing on the same level. Paul was polite towards Gentiles rather than polemical, drawing them towards the Savior (1 Cor 10:32–33). Rather than revile their idols, he proclaimed "that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor 5:19). He showed respect to each socioreligious group by adapting his lifestyle to fit its customs and background (1 Cor 9:20–23). When speaking to Pharisees, he adapted his identity and preaching style to that of the Pharisees (Acts 22; 23). When preaching to Greeks, he praised their religious fervor and cited verses from their sacred poems (Acts 17), while staying true to the oneness of God and the lordship of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 9:21). In Ephesus, for example, Paul and his "fellow workers for the Kingdom of God" (Col 4:11) taught daily for over two years, and they had a great impact, yet they never insulted the traditional religion of the Ephe-

sians nor their goddess (Acts 19:37). They proclaimed "the word of the Lord" regarding his Kingdom (Acts 19:8–10), without polemics, and they looked to God to confirm the word with grace and power. The result was that many believed and then abandoned their idolatry and secret arts on their own. Thus Paul is a model of the Kingdom-of-God paradigm of mission, as opposed to the conflict-of-religions paradigm.

Jesus is the perfect model of the Kingdom paradigm of mission. When Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God among Samaritans in Samaria (Luke 17:11–19; John 4:5–42), to Gentiles in Lebanon and Decapolis (Mark 5:1–20; 7:24–8:10), and to Romans in Galilee (Matthew 8:5–13), he did not command them to observe the Jewish religious practices that he and his own disciples observed. He did not proselytize at all. Although in Galilee he lived in close proximity to pagan temples, and he traveled in the pagan regions of Lebanon and Decapolis, he did not condemn their religious traditions and institutions but revealed to them something far better: the Kingdom of God and the surpassing grace of the King. The ones he criticized were the leaders of the "house of Israel," who were too judgmental and narrow-minded to receive the Kingdom.

Sectarian Mission versus Kingdom Mission

(based on Hiebert 1994, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, Grand Rapids: Baker, chapter six.)

	
<p>Sectarian Mission: The goal of mission is to expand a particular denomination or religious tradition by encouraging people to join it and to comply with the membership criteria of its boundary markers.</p>	<p>Kingdom Mission: The goal of mission is to encourage people to enter the Kingdom of God by becoming disciples of Jesus as their King, Savior and Lord, and to obey all he has commanded.</p>

When Jesus commissioned his apostles to make disciples in all ethnic groups, he told them to teach the new disciples to do everything he had commanded. This would have included his command to believe that God is one and is due their undivided love (as commanded in Mark 12:29) and what he taught about the Kingdom of God, as well as the good attitudes and behavior he commanded for the people of God's Kingdom. Jesus did not, however, command everyone to observe one particular pattern of worship, and he did not establish one himself. He commanded his people to be constant in prayer, faith, love, peace, and joy. In practice these virtues have been encouraged by religious services of a variety of forms, highlighting the fact that various religious activities and institutions are instruments of God's mission rather than the goals of mission. Their encouragement should therefore be in accord with what is best for the individuals and faith communities concerned rather than for purposes of proselytism. Guidelines for this concern were clearly established in a 1997 report issued by the Roman Catholic church and global leaders of Pentecostal and Charismatic churches after seven years of dialogue. They agreed that evangelism is "an essential part of the mission of the Church" (§8), but "proselytism is an unethical activity" (§93) and "must be avoided" (§94). Evangelists and church leaders should "respect the dignity of persons and their freedom to make their own choices" (§93).¹⁹ Mark Driscoll writes, "Therefore, while not imposing religion on anyone, the church of Jesus Christ is to constantly be proposing reconciliation with God to everyone ... [using] timely biblical methods that are changing depending upon culture. This is the essence of what it means to be a missional church that contextualizes its ministry."²⁰

E. Stanley Jones described the relationship between the Kingdom of God and religions, including forms of Christianity (which he called "the Church"). He wrote:

This kingdom is bound up with no culture, no nation, no race, and no

religion. It is open to everybody, everywhere on equal terms. Jesus never used the word religion, for he was not founding a new religion to set over against other religions, for religion is man's search for God. The Gospel is God's search for man. So anything good in any race, religion, or culture, which is worth preserving, will not be lost in the Kingdom. "I come not to destroy but to fulfil." Anything good that can be fitted into the Kingdom in culture or religion will be fulfilled in the Kingdom. "Into it the kings of earth bring their glories ... they shall bring to it the glories and treasures of the nations" (Rev 21:24–25 Moffatt).

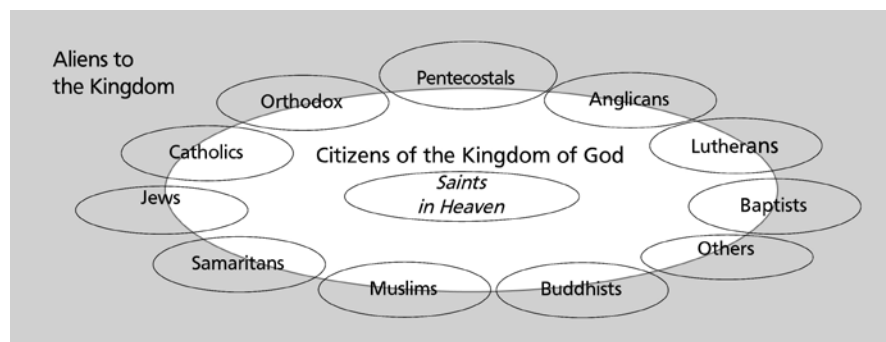
But the Church is not the exclusive agency of the coming of the Kingdom. Wherever men bring forth the fruits of the Kingdom, there the Kingdom is, to that degree, inside the Church or outside the Church.²¹

Jones observed from experience that there are people belonging to diverse socioreligious groups who accept the authority of the Bible, believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, and "bring forth the fruits of the Kingdom," and who must therefore belong to the Kingdom. Today there are hundreds of thousands of born-again followers of Jesus and the Bible within non-Christian socioreligious groups, such as Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and others, and the amazing evidence of God's grace and spiritual fruit among them is undeniable. This situation is represented again in Figure 7.

Many Christians regard this situation as less than ideal and want believers in other denominations and socioreligious groups to leave them and join one like their own, so they can be alike and can benefit from the advantages of their own tradition. However, what is clearly important for spiritual growth is that people (1) belong to the invisible ecclesia of God's Kingdom and (2) be part of a local ecclesia of fellow members of the Kingdom.

The Greek word *ecclesia* originally meant an assembly of citizens, called out of their homes and places of work to meet together. In the New Testament it usually signifies local assemblies of citizens of the Kingdom of God or the citizenry of the Kingdom as a whole. In the Greek Old Testament it translates *qāhāl*, meaning an assembly, usually of God's people, and sometimes the whole community. The question then arises as to what constitutes an authentic ecclesia of the people of God's Kingdom? There are, of course, diverse ecclesiologies, as Kärkkäinen's survey ably shows,²² but historically theologians have distinguished an authentic local ecclesia by its spiritual qualities and its visible practices. Irenaeus wrote in 180 AD that it is through the Holy Spirit that we have "communion with Christ ... and the ladder of ascent to God," and that "where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church, and every kind of grace."²³ So, by his definition, the spiritual indicator of an authentic ecclesia is that the Spirit of God is present, conveying God's manifold grace to his people through Christ.

Figure 7: The Kingdom of God includes people from many different socioreligious groups.



As for the practical indicators of a local ecclesia, John Calvin described them as follows:

Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence, since his promise cannot fail, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."²⁴

This implies leadership as well, which L. D. Waterman makes explicit.²⁵ Different Christian traditions have different leadership structures, observe the Lord's Supper in different ways, and baptize differently, some not even using water,²⁶ yet they do have these things in some way. Even Jesus fellowships outside Christianity, such as ones among Orthodox Jews and Sunni Muslims, have leaders, study the Scriptures, celebrate the Lord's Supper, and baptize in various ways. Some Christians object to Kingdom assemblies like these which do not identify with a form of Christian religion, but they exist anyway, and it is important to give God time to develop these faith communities in the way he wants. God spent two thousand years working with the Hebrews before he sent Christ and inaugurated his Kingdom. It was more than a thousand years after that before the satisfaction theory of the atonement was developed, and centuries more before it took the penal substitutionary form that evangelicals now take for granted as the Gospel.²⁷ This shows that God works over time, and that we need to be patient while he works with new bodies of believers in contexts outside the Judeo-Christian cultural sphere, using them to spread the Word throughout their societies while bringing them into maturity as Kingdom communities.

While humans tend to value uniformity and oppose differences, these natural tendencies create division.

The spiritual indicator of an authentic ecclesia is that the Spirit of God is present, conveying God's manifold grace to his people through Christ

It is evident from the variety in the natural world and from the teachings of the New Testament that God values diversity. At the time of Christ there was religious conflict among Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles, but Christ "himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility," making all believers "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:14, 19). When John was granted an end-time vision of the redeemed in heaven, as recorded in Revelation, he could discern representation of every language and social group. As for religions, there is no temple in the world to come, and presumably no religions: "his servants will worship him," and "they will see his face" (Rev 22:3-4), knowing God fully, even as He knows them (1 Cor 13:21). Then it will be clear, as E. Stanley Jones said, that God's "kingdom is bound up with no culture, no nation, no race, and no religion."

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands. (Rev 7:9)

Conclusion

From the foundation of the world, God prepared the future Kingdom for his children to inherit at the end of this age (Matt 25:34), and we can say that the mission of God has been to direct history towards this goal. To that end God gave us the Scriptures and the Savior, Jesus Christ—who is God himself, the Word of God incarnate—to be the Messianic King of God's present (and future) Kingdom and to save people into it for God's eternal glory. Jesus fulfilled the divine mission in several ways. He pro-

claimed the opportunity for people to become heirs of the Kingdom of God through faith in him; he taught them what to believe, what to value, and how to behave as citizens of the Kingdom; he died for their sins and rose to life for their salvation; and he sent the Holy Spirit to guide his disciples, empower them, and sanctify them.

Jesus then commissioned his disciples to serve the mission of God themselves by proclaiming this Gospel of the Kingdom to every ethnic group (Matt 24:14; Mark 16:15), by discipling those who believe in each group, by baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to obey all that Jesus had commanded (Matt 28:19). God gave the people of his Kingdom—the global ecclesia—the Bible, the Holy Spirit, the fellowship of the saints, and gifts of ministry to equip them to minister and lead them to maturity in Christ. Local ecclesiae foster the spiritual growth and ministry of God's people by facilitating their meeting together to study the Bible, to praise God, to pray for one another and for others, to be instruments of God's grace to their whole community, and to nurture the Kingdom qualities of love, righteousness, peace and joy (James 2:8; Rom 14:17). Thus the Bible reveals a Kingdom paradigm of the mission of God and of the role of God's people in this mission.

Jesus did not found an institutional religion or commission his disciples to propagate one. Nevertheless, organized religions have enormous instrumental value in serving God's mission. Christian religious institutions provide an organized means of evangelizing, baptizing, discipling, and teaching, supplemented by home groups. When disciples of Christ in non-Christian cultures remain outside of institutional

Christianity, they usually rely on home meetings alone for these services. On the other hand, when these disciples retain their native social identity and take a Kingdom-of-God approach to mission and ecclesia, the Gospel of the Kingdom often spreads throughout their social networks, leading many more to faith in Christ, including whole families.

It is evident from the Bible and from observation that the ultimate mission of God has not been to make some particular denomination or socioreligious group triumphant over others, nor to limit his grace to one of them, but to lead history and humankind into a new and perfect world, his eternal Kingdom. That future Kingdom will have no temple and no need for religions as such, “for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev 21:22). God himself will dwell among his people (Rev 21:3; cf. Lev 26:12; Zech 2:10; 2 Cor 6:16), and they will delight in his presence. They will have perfect “righteousness, peace and joy” in their relationship with God and with one another, to the eternal glory of his name. God’s mission will have been accomplished.

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. (Rev 21:3–4) IJFM

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- ¹ Ralph Winter, 'The Kingdom Strikes Back: Ten Epochs of Redemptive History', in Ralph Winter and Stephen C. Hawthorne (eds.), *Perspectives on the World Christian*

Movement: A Reader (4th edn.; Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009), p. 210.

² Mark Driscoll, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2010), p. 411.

³ Herman Ridderbos, 'Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven', in J. D. Douglas (ed.), *New Bible Dictionary* (2nd edn.; Leicester, England: IVP, 1982), p. 657. See also Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: P&R Publishing, 1962).

⁴ John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), p. 56. More common are analyses such as that in Boyd Hunt, *Redeemed! Eschatological Redemption and the Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), pp. 66-67, 73. Hunt analyzes the usage of 'kingdom of God' into two categories. The first is God's universal rule in creation. The second category has three senses: "the kingdom of Israel," "the kingdom present" and "the kingdom consummated."

⁵ Ralph Winter, 'Three Mission Eras and the Loss and Recovery of Kingdom Mission, 1800-2000', in Ralph Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (eds.), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (4th edn.; Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009), p. 264.

⁶ N. T. Wright, 'Building for the Kingdom: Our Work is Not in Vain', *ibid.*, p. 97.

⁷ See G. R. Beasley-Murray, 'The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 35/1 (1992). He writes (p. 23), "May we translate the phrase 'in your midst'? That is possible, for Jesus was standing there; and where Jesus is, there is the kingdom. But that is a very rare use of the term *entos*. More likely we may take the meaning to be as in various contemporary papyri: 'The kingdom of God is within your reach.'" Wright takes the same view in N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Concepts and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 469. He writes: "But philologically the meaning is most likely to be a third option: 'within your grasp.' 'If you had eyes to see,' Jesus seems to be saying, 'you could reach out and take hold of the new reality that is already at work.' This reading is backed up by the following verses (17.22-37)." So also J. C. O'Neill, 'The Kingdom of God', *Novum Testamentum*, 35 (1993), p. 139. Luz suggests that it means both "in your midst" and "available to you" in U. Luz, 'Basileia', in Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (eds.), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 202.

⁸ W. F. Arndt, 'The New Testament Teaching on the Kingdom of God', *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 21/1 (1950), p. 20.

⁹ Charles Erdman, *The Gospel of Mark: An exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), p. 35.

¹⁰ "Jesus was announcing that the long-awaited kingdom of Israel's god was indeed coming to birth, but that it did not look like what had been imagined. The return from exile, the defeat of evil, and the return of YHWH to Zion were all coming about, but not in the way Israel had supposed." Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, p. 201.

¹¹ According to N. T. Wright, "Narrative analysis of the parables is as yet in its infancy." *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹² See Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (3rd edn.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), vol. 1, p. 205, vol. 2, pp. 433-35.

¹³ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), p. 200.

¹⁴ Frank J. Matera, *The Kingship of Jesus: Composition and Theology in Mark 15* (SBL Dissertation Series 66; Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1982), p. 151.

¹⁵ This view conflicts somewhat with dispensational teaching; they say (rightly perhaps) that the main mystery is that the kingdom will have a hidden interim stage before it comes in glory. They differ from other scholars in claiming that this mystery kingdom was not put forth until the Jews had rejected the messianic kingship of Jesus and the nationalistic kingdom that they say he offered to them.

¹⁶ Aloysius M. Ambrozic, *The Hidden Kingdom: A redaction-critical study of the references to the kingdom of God in Mark's Gospel* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1972), p. 45.

¹⁷ Ladd's view of the mysteries seems overly reductionistic. "The mystery of the kingdom is this: Before this eschatological consummation . . . the kingdom of God has entered this age and invaded the kingdom of Satan in spiritual power to bring to men in advance the blessings . . . which belong to the age to come." George Eldon Ladd, 'Kingdom of Christ, God, Heaven', in Walter Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 609. The actuality is much more complex, as indicated by the variety of parables required to represent the various mysteries.

¹⁸ Charles E. Van Engen, 'The Uniqueness of Christ', in Ralph Winter and Stephen C. Hawthorne (eds.), *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (4th edn.; Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009), p. 180.

¹⁹ Mark Driscoll, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2010), p. 312.

²⁰ *Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness: The Report from the Fourth Phase of the International Dialogue 1990-1997 Between the Roman Catholic Church and some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders* (1997) <<http://www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj4/rcpent97.html>>.

²¹ E. Stanley Jones, *The Unshakable Kingdom and the Unchanging Person* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), pp. 292, 293.

²² See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 'Identity and Plurality: A Pentecostal-Charismatic Perspective', *International Review of Missions*, 91/363 (2002).

²³ Irenaeus, 'Against Heresies', in Alexander Roberts et al. (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (1; New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1907 [180]), p. 458, §3.24.1. As examples of grace in the ecclesia, Irenaeus cites "apostles, prophets, teachers, and all the other means through which the Spirit works."

²⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (London: J. Clarke, 1949 [1559]), §4.1.9.

²⁵ Forthcoming in L. D. Waterman, 'What Is Church? From Surveying Scripture to Applying in Culture', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 47/October (2011). "A biblical church is a significant group of Jesus' followers having an identity as a church (*ekklisia*) who gather together regularly on an ongoing basis, with recognized leadership under the headship of Christ, to worship God and encourage one another in obeying all his commands (including, but not limited to baptism and the Lord's Supper)."

²⁶ Quakers have traditionally distinguished between the baptism of John, which was in water, and the baptism that Christ performs, which is in the Holy Spirit, saying the latter supplanted water baptism. The Salvation Army views enrollment and the donning of their senior uniform as the equivalent of baptism. Among evangelists and many evangelical churches, especially ones that practice infant baptism, the confessional role of believer's baptism has been largely supplanted by the sinner's prayer.

²⁷ Anselm of Canterbury proposed the satisfaction theory of the atonement in *Cur Deus Homo* (1098 AD), arguing that the death of Christ satisfied the debt to God's honor owed by humankind because of their sin. Thomas Aquinas revised this in his *Summa Theologia* (1274 AD) to a penal substitution, and John Calvin developed this further in the 16th century. Many evangelicals regard this doctrine as the core of the Gospel, but it took centuries to reach that status.