

Treasure in Clay Jars

Lesson Nine: Pointing Toward the Reign of God

Outcome Objectives:

1. Learners will use scripture and theological reflection to explore the meaning of kingdom of God/reign of God/rule of God.
2. Learners will develop a sense of expectation and hope about the emergence of God's kingdom in the world.
3. Learners will discuss the church's role as an instrument, agent, and sign of God's reign.

Introduction

1. Note: See #3 under Exploration for a possible way to enter into this study.
2. Intro question: "What do we think of when we speak about kingdom?"
Discuss these typical reductions or distortions of what kingdom means:
 - *Christendom* (refer to material in Lesson Two): Whenever the "kingdom of God" is associated with political boundaries or civilizations it is reduced to less than its biblical meaning. When we regard America as a "Christian nation" are we in fact borrowing a worldview from Christendom?
 - *Social justice and social reform*: When we equate the "kingdom of God" with programs or movements that attempt to change a particular society we have reduced the reign of God to less than its full meaning. Certain efforts at justice and reform may be "signs" of God's reign, but when the emphasis is on our efforts to "establish" or "build" God's kingdom we miss the fact that the kingdom of God exists prior to our efforts and his rule is established by his own sovereignty rather than our work.
 - *Church on earth/church membership*: When we equate the kingdom of God with a tangible, identifiable institution we reduce kingdom to less than its biblical meaning. This reduction tends to limit God's kingdom to the "citizens" of the kingdom. The rest of creation and humanity are regarded as part of another kingdom.
 - *Individual faith*: This reduction describes the kingdom of God as his rule in our individual lives. Common phrases born out of this perspective are "Christ reigns in me" or "when Christ rules in your heart."
 - *Heaven/Future reality*: Certainly the kingdom of God is coming, but in what sense is it already here? Notice that there is sometimes to assume that the kingdom has already come completely or is completely a future reality.
 - *Note*: These reductions and distortions are not "totally wrong" they are simply limited in their scope. They are insufficient perspectives because they have reduced the reign of God to something less than what it really is.

2. Consider the following Scriptures that speak of the reign of God. Review these and notice the scope of the reign of God.
 - **Luke 17:20-21.** What were the Pharisees expectations of the coming kingdom? What does Jesus mean when he says “the kingdom of God is within (or among) you?” [Note that “you” is plural in this sentence].
 - **Acts 14:21-22.** Notice that Paul and Barnabas encourage believers to endure hardship as they enter into the kingdom. What does this word of encouragement tell us about the kingdom of God?
 - **Romans 14:16-18.** What does this definition of what the kingdom is and isn’t tell us about the reign of God?
 - **Hebrews 12:28-29.** What is meant by “receiving” a kingdom? Who is establishing the kingdom? (God). What is our response to God’s initiative? (hope, encouragement, faithfulness).

Exploration

1. In the previous lesson we recognized that a curious reality in the past history of Churches of Christ relegated the Holy Spirit to the written words of scripture. Another curious reality of the past history of Churches of Christ is that it was considered illegitimate to pray “Thy Kingdom Come” or the Lord’s Prayer containing this phrase. The rationale was that the kingdom had already come on the day of Pentecost. This is the case in Alexander Campbell’s views and we might note that we have inherited his views.¹ However, there is an alternate viewpoint with the heritage of Churches of Christ expressed by Barton Stone and David Lipscomb. Stone believed that the church gave glimpses into the coming kingdom, but he did not equate the two. Lipscomb anticipated a day when the kingdom of God would finally break into this world and consume all earthly governments – the best and the worst.²
2. C.S. Lewis referred to the world as “enemy-occupied territory” and Christianity as the “story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.”³ Notice that Lewis doesn’t call this warfare. How do we sabotage the powers of the enemy that have occupied this world? How does Ephesians 6 inform our understanding of the conflict between the reign of God (the rightful king) and the powers and principalities?

¹ For a discussion of Alexander Campbell’s dispensational views on the kingdom see Leonard Allen, *Things Unseen: Churches of Christ In and After the Modern Age*, Leafwood, 2004. pp. 36-38.

² For more on Stone and Lipscomb’s apocalyptic views, see Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, Eerdmans, 1996. pp, 94 and 123.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Simon and Schuster, 1980. p. 51.

3. Matthew 6:33 is a familiar text about the kingdom of God. You may choose to sing the well-known song “Seek Ye First” at some point and then ask the group to reflect on what they have sung.
 - What would it look for the church to “seek first the kingdom of God?” Why is “righteousness” included with kingdom?
 - How might we point toward the reign of God as a sign of the kingdom or reign of God that is coming?
 - How does our presence in the world become an instrument of God’s in-breaking reign?
 - How do we serve as an agent of the in-breaking kingdom?
 - What would change about us if we held before our church community this question: “How can I (we) bring the influence, reign, and authority of God to bear here so that people can know him and glorify him?”⁴

Response:

1. Read **Romans 8:18-30** and respond to the following:
 - What is the scope of this text about future hope? What is at stake? Notice that all creation anticipates the reign of God? Why? What have the other “powers” done to the creation?
 - Do Christians participate even now in the reign of God? What is the meaning of verse 23?
 - How is our hope a way of pointing toward the reign of God?
2. Conclude with stories of how God’s reign is breaking into the life of your community.

⁴ This question is suggested by Milfred Minatrea, *Shaped By God’s Heart: The Passion and Practices of Missional Churches*, Josey-Bass, 2004. p. 131.