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What is the Kingdom of God?

Howard M. Ervin
Oral Roberts University

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WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

May 1985

Mark 1:14-15

Turn with me in the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 1, Verses 14 and 15. This is a passage that we have looked at before. I invite you to look at it with me again, but we are going to look at it in a different way than we have looked at it before. Let me just give you a little autobiographical insight into why we are looking at it in another way.

I have become increasingly concerned with so many movements in the church and I seriously question where they are heading. In Mark 1:14,15 we read that after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee preaching – what: The Gospel of God – and saying what: The Time is Fulfilled. Now, as we pointed out before, this is prophetic time; this is a reference to the Old Testament prophecies concerning Messiah. Messiah had come and therefore that prophetic time of anticipation is fulfilled. We go on, and the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe – what? What gospel? The gospel of God; which is the gospel of the Kingdom of God. The only gospel Jesus ever preached and the only gospel he ever gave his church to preach is the Gospel of the Kingdom.

For example, when we look at the four gospels, there are something like parabolic illustrations, all of which relate to the them of the Kingdom of God. By way of illustration, if we glance at Luke’s Gospel, Chapter 14, we find in Verse7, the parable of the guests at the marriage feast. In Verse 16 the parable of the dinner, in Chapter 15 we have the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the lost son. All of these bear upon the theme of the Gospel of the Kingdom.

When we turn to Acts, Chapter 1, it seems to me significant that in the forty days of post-resurrection appearances, we are told in Acts 3 that Jesus presented himself alive; that is, to his disciples, after his suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of 40 days and speaking of the things concerning what - the Kingdom of God. Perhaps ten years later

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when Philip went to Samaria and preached, it was the human focus, the human instrumentality for a tremendous revival among the Samaritans. We are told in Acts 8:12 that when the Samaritans believed Philip preaching the good news about the Kingdom of God – and the word “good news” is simply the gospel of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. They were being baptized, both men and woman and the like. And then, when we turn over to the 28th Chapter of the book of Acts, the last recorded historical word that we have in the scriptures concerning Paul is found in this 28th chapter. He is found in Rome, he is a prisoner under house arrest and we are told in Acts 28, Verses 30 and 31, that Paul stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, with all openness, unhindered.

Now, we'll go back this evening and explore something of the significance of the Kingdom of God. Certainly something that loomed up large in the life of the apostles does merit our attention. In fact, we are told that, according to the long ending of the gospel of Mark which, incidentally, I do not have the same problems with textually, that some people do, that we are told that the function of miracles is to confirm the preaching of the gospel by the signs that followed. So I submit that anything that occupied that much of our Lord's attention certainly ought to occupy our attention.

What is the nature of the Kingdom of God?

Well, we might ask ourselves, has any one of us ever lived in a monarchy, and I don't mean simply a constitutional monarchy as some of the modern monarchy's are, but have any of us ever really lived in oriental despotism that we have any idea, do we have any frame of reference with which to interpret the phrase “Kingdom of God” and I think the answer is quite obviously “No, we have not.”

I said one time we live in a “democracy” and was corrected – he said no, it's a republic, so we won't quibble about that, but we live in a democracy – in a democracy, theoretically. We all have a part in the decision making process. Theoretically everyone's opinion is consulted, through our elected representatives, the will of the people, the mind of the people, is brought to

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bear on contemporary issues and so there is an input, as it were, from all of the people. This has gone a bit to seed, in my opinion, in our own day, because we no longer live, really, in a homogeneous society as we did in America, but we are told now that this is the post-Christian era, that we now live in a pluralistic society and that means that everyone's opinion, no matter how diverse it be, no matter how radical it is, every opinion is of equal value and has equal rights before the law, no matter how destructive those opinions might be.

But let me point out that in a Kingdom, particularly the model we have in scripture, it is a model of absolute authority. When we look at it in the Old Testament, the Kingdom is absolutely authoritarian in structure, as it was under the Kingdom of Solomon. That doesn't mean that there isn't input, but what it does mean is that there is a central focus for authority. The same is true of the kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is not a pluralistic society. When it comes to the constitution of the Kingdom, the laws of the Kingdom, it isn't even a democratic society, because you and I, and no one else, has had input into the laws of the Kingdom.

Remember that the Old Testament was the Bible for the apostolic church. When Paul said "all scripture is given by the inspiration of God" he is referring to the Old Testament. He hasn't written all of his own epistles and I doubt that Paul ever suspected that his writing would ever achieve the same authority as scripture that the Old Testament came to have, so that when the apostles speak of the scriptures, they mean the Old Testament and we find, for example, in the Old Testament, the whole corpus of law that regulates the conduct of the children of Israel within their covenant with God and notice that it is the covenant made by God and the constitution of the laws of it are ordained by God.

When we look for example, at Exodus, Chapter 20, we have ten words, the ten commandments, Exodus 20:2: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery". Commandment Number One: "You shall have no other Gods besides me; you shall not make for yourselves an idol or any likeness of anything that's in heaven above nor the earth beneath, nor the water under the earth, for you shall not worship them or serve them, for I your Lord, your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children unto the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing mercy down

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to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments; you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. For the Lord will not hold him guiltless, he will not leave him unpunished whoever takes the Name in vain. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, six days shall thou labor and do all thy work and the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. You shall not do any work, neither your sons, your daughter, your male, your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you; in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and seeing it was good, he rested on the seventh day, therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you. You shall not commit murder. You shall not commit adultery,. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant; nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that belongs to him.

We have the constitution of the Kingdom spelled out succinctly in those ten words, those ten commandments, there exemplified in what is known as the caustic law, that is, the case law, where these laws are implied and interpreted and re-applied all through what would have amounted to the court system of Israel, but the laws are not negotiable. They are interpreted and applied to fit various situations as they arise, but the laws themselves are not negotiable. For example, in Matthew 6, which someone interpreted as the Gospel of the Kingdom of the New Testament, we find that our Lord does not repudiate these laws but, rather, he makes them more stringent.

Let me give you an illustration in Matthew 5:21: "You have heard that the ancients were told that you shall not commit murder, that whosoever commits murder shall be liable to the court, but I say to you that everyone that is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court and whosoever shall say to his brother 'Raca'; that is, 'you fool' or 'you empty headed one' shall be guilty before the supreme court. Whoever shall say fool shall be guilty enough to go into the hell of fire." "You have heard that it is said you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman and lusts for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart."

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Enough of this. To illustrate what I want to say is that the laws of the Kingdom are not negotiable; they are not open to private interpretation. They are not open to flaunting them. We really had no part in the decision-making process that established them. They were handed down from our Lord and by our Lord. Now, this runs directly counter to the civilization, the world in which we live, even in many areas of the church. When the Lord said: “Thou shall not commit adultery” he meant it. Now, it is significant, as someone has pointed out, that every one of the ten words of the ten commandments given in the Old Testament is repeated in the New Testament in one way or another with the exception of the law of the Sabbath – and with good reason for, obviously, the New Testament church does not worship on the seventh day, it worships on the first day. The seventh day commemorated creation, the first day commemorates resurrection, but with that one change the constitution of the Kingdom remains constant.

We are not at liberty to change the moral and ethical code by which the Kingdom is governed. The question is, where is the Kingdom and, as I have pointed out on previous occasions, our Lord gives us a clue to that in Luke 17:20 when the Pharisees came to him one day and asked where is the Kingdom and he answered: “It is not here, it is not there, it does not come with seeing, but the Kingdom of God is... one translation is “within you” and I have great difficulty with seeing the Kingdom of God in the Pharisees who were rejecting it – the other translation is: “The Kingdom of God is in your midst” that is to say, where the King is, there is the Kingdom.

In the New Testament, Paul, for example, says “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” John tells us in the great High Priestly Prayer, the words of Jesus that “My father and I will come to you and we will make our abode with you, we will be one with you.” Where the King is, there is the Kingdom. This is what I am saying – so that the church is, in that sense, the Kingdom hidden from the world because the King is not visible, but it is nonetheless the Kingdom, so the moral and ethical rules, laws of the Kingdom, are not negotiable, they are not open to the latest fads and fancies, they are not open even to situation ethics, they represent absolutes, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, lying, all of these things transgress the laws of the Kingdom. The laws of the Kingdom are given not only to regulate conduct here, but also to bring us into the likeness of Christ.

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There has been a tendency in some quarters to see the Kingdom as past. “Israel’s in the past” and then, again, to see it as “Israel’s in the future” and this is to give an eschatological interpretation of the Kingdom, but the church is a kind of a parentheses in between. It’s a second something, almost third something and, therefore, grace is the law of the Kingdom and that can cause things to antinomianism; that is, to a flaunting of the law – but this is to overlook the fact that where the King is, there is the Kingdom.

Paul was quite conscious of this. There is a passage in I Corin.6: because it speaks in my mind of our own day or I Corin.6:9: “Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the Kingdom of God. “Do not be deceived, neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, swindlers, shall inherit the Kingdom of God, but such were some you but, but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” This is the repentant believer. Jesus said: “the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the gospel” and this is the repentant aspect of it and yet, now we’re asked to believe that all of these things are now permissible under grace in the church.

Recently in a meeting of Theologians, and I will not identify them further than that, some of them expressed their extreme dis-ease in their own religious denomination and association because the head of that denomination in a given area was a protagonist for homosexuals and there was even some hit that one of the clergy in the area had gone through a homosexual marriage. This was supposed to be acceptable and, of course, it was a matter of considerable heartache to the individuals to whom I refer, but can the church temporize with those things in society and accept them into the church as acceptable under grace.

For example, one of the distorted interpretations that one encounters in the passage that I’ve just read in I Corin. 6 relates to the understanding of the interpretation of homosexuals and I want to point out simply that they are listed with a whole list of iniquitous conduct. The interpretation that was given was that this doesn’t apply to practicing homosexuals – it only applies to heterosexuals who commit a homosexual act, which is sheer and utter nonsense and

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yet we are asked to believe that this is permissible in the church “under grace”. What has happened is that so much of what we are hearing in the churches today is not theology, it is first of all “sociology.”

A number of years ago there was a cliché that became common among theologians. It was no longer studying theology, it was doing theology and, in essence, this was putting theology to work in any given sociological context, so theology became no longer a discipline in its own right, with the standard of right and wrong – absolute standards – but underwent an evolution, a kind of relativistic evolution in which the culture determined what was to be normative for the church.

A second thing that give me great dis-ease is the politicization of the gospel; that is, particularly where the church people find inspiration or relationship with Marxism, and this is called “liberation theology.” Now, my own response to that is: This is not “liberation theology” it is “liberation ideology” because wherever there is an unholy wedding between dialectical Marxism and the scriptures, it is no longer a theology, it is an ideology because Marxism does not have a theology, it is predicated upon an antithetic anthropology and simply larding it with biblical text doesn’t make it theology.

On the other hand, reinterpreting the scriptures in terms of a Marxist dialectic does not make the scriptures Marxist. There is a vast, vast chasm between the two and yet this is having tremendous influence in the churches today. The whole question, a I’ve suggested, is politicizing the gospel; in other words, the gospel does not have absolute moral values – the moral values are deduced from society and this whole cliché of what is “justice.”

Now what I say next I am not sure will be inflammatory for some people. I don’t intend it to be – apartheid is an evil, and I can understand why well meaning sincere people would be disturbed by it, but I would be more impressed if I saw pictures of those churchmen who march against the South African Embassy protesting apartheid also had pictures taken of them marching around the Rumanian Embassy protesting the destruction, the bulldozing, of the Baptist Churches and the persecution of the Baptist in Rumania. I would be more impressed if I

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saw these same churchmen parading at the Polish Embassy where Marxism is doing its best to destroy the Church in Poland and to destroy the free labor movement. I would be impressed with this kind of zeal for injustice if I saw pictures of these same churchmen picketing the Russian Embassy and protesting the rape of Afghanistan.

What happens is that with the politicization of the church and of theology, there seems to be – and this disturbs me because this is the way I see it – the rhetoric always has about it a Marxist ring and one cannot help but feel a sense of risk, knowing that wherever Marxism has triumphed, the church has entered a period of martyrdom and these are things that disturb me because none of them recognize the absolute nature of the Kingdom of God. There's no vertical dimension to it. It is a Kingdom to be realized, but not by God, but by the efforts of men – it's a purely sociological political phenomenon.

Another thing that I find disturbing is that the Kingdom of God is to be brought in by the Holy Spirit and our Lord. I find no pneumatology in so many of the movements now that are wracking the churches. I might even say and, again, I am aware that this immediately places me at odds with others, but I have misgivings about this so-called sanctuary movement where the most well meaning, and the best appearance that can be put on it, always seem to come down on the side of the Marxist dialectic and the answer of the gospels always, somehow or other, seem to be lost in the shuffle.

I think it is time for us to ask what is the nature of the Kingdom of God. Is the Kingdom of God a theological concept which means that its nature, its fulfillment, its constitution, is determined by the scriptures, by the word of God, or is the kingdom of God a sociological phenomenon that is to be achieved by politicizing the church.

What are the alternatives? Our Lord never once engaged in any kind of force to achieve His purpose. In fact, at this arrest in the garden when Peter, in a moment of ill advised zeal, pulled a sword and cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest, our Lord told him to put up the sword saying: "Those that live by the sword will die by the sword," and yet, in so many areas of the church we find violence is countenanced and even advocated. I cannot find that

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Jesus ever politicized the gospel of the Kingdom as he preached it. He held it up as a moral and ethical idea to be borne in the hearts of men and to be consummated by the Holy Spirit. I find the same thing to be true as I look at the epistles. I confess my own personal dis-ease with what I see happening.

I suppose some of you have been looking at the news of John Paul's visit to the Netherlands. Whether one agrees with what John Paul stands for, I think that the conduct of the Netherlands is absolutely unconscionable. I think the conduct there is a total disgrace and it seems to me as I remarked the other night, the Western nations won the war and have lost the peace, for they have not only lost the peace, but they have lost their soul and I would simply summarize what I am saying now by saying that I think the church will realize its own mission and do far more good in the world if it gets back to the message of the Kingdom as Jesus preached it: "The Kingdom is at hand, repent." "Repent and believe in the gospel of the Kingdom."

In our society there is no repentance because there is no sin! What has happened with the church, whether it be the pluralism in America in our own churches here; whether it be so-called liberation theology, there is no repentance because there is no "sin". There is no cross and there is no redemption. Once you blur the nature of sin you immediately make a treaty of the cross of Christ. If there's no sin, there's no repentance. If there's no sin there's no need for a Savior and if sin is only social injustices, that makes it collective rather than personal, where the gospel of the Kingdom says everyone must repent to enter into the Kingdom.

Why are the Eastern religions brought into the Christian churches?

For one reason, I think. It fits the mood of America. Eastern religions have no cross, no Christ, no sin and no concept of sin, hence no repentance. It is a purely horizontal message. Its end result is an altered state of consciousness. Its purpose is not union with a personal transcendent God.

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Now, remember, that even in Buddhism and Hinduism and all these oriental meditation cults that come out of it, that the contact with the world's soul, or nirvana, the absorption into the "all" is not a relationship with a personal and attendant God, it is simply a re-absorption into the impersonal forces of nature.