

STRONG FOUNDATIONS

LET'S WORK TOGETHER TO CHANGE OUR WORLD

Kingdom Living, Part One

Introduction

In many ways, it is easy to talk about the Kingdom of God; it is easy to contrast a forward-looking and outward-looking 'Kingdom-focus' with a backward-looking and inward-looking 'Church-focus'. But I have heard many sermons in which the congregation is encouraged to abandon their Church-focus and adopt a Kingdom-focus, when all they are actually being asked to do is to 'get on board' and support a new church project the preacher is keen to promote.

When we understand that the Kingdom of God was the central focus of Jesus' teaching and ministry, we can see that much of our theology needs to be re-examined and possibly re-shaped. But what difference does this altered theology, this change of focus make in the real world? How does this doctrine change the way we live, what we say and do?

Here are a few thoughts about the possible changes we might make when we start to try and live our prayer, "Your Kingdom come."

Our Evangelistic Message

Over the years, I have heard a good many evangelistic sermons. What I usually hear is a gospel of salvation, the good news about spiritual safety and protection from pain: we tell people to come to Jesus, so they will go to Heaven when they die and avoid the eternal flames.

In contrast, the gospel preached by Jesus, the gospel of the Kingdom of God is a message of sacrificial commitment to a crucified Lord. The salvation being offered includes the promise that when we die we will go to be with Jesus, but it includes far more and is far more challenging.

Whichever gospel message we preach, we are likely to agree on this simple point: everyone is welcome! God's arms are open wide, but – and I know it is not our intention – we so often put barriers in the way.

We are keen that people should pray the right prayer, that they should have the right doctrine of the atonement, that they should have an appropriate set of moral standards (like ours!). We do not deliberately exclude anybody, but the way we share our faith and the way we expect people to respond makes it very likely that anyone who comes to Jesus will be like us, in their theology and their lifestyle.

Jesus taught that what makes a man unclean is what goes out of the mouth, not what goes into it (Matthew 15:11). This was deeply offensive to His original hearers, and part of that offense arose because it follows that God does not see the Gentiles as unclean because of the food they eat, and the fact that it is not kosher.

Jesus also taught that “an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:23), not on the local mountain or in the Temple at Jerusalem. He was saying that God does not see the Gentiles as distant from Him because they worship at the wrong holy shrines.

The Kingdom of God is like a net, (Matthew 13:47) pulling in every type of fish. God is no respecter of persons: He will take anybody.

Our Pastoral Care

We can often assume that Pastoral Care is what the Pastor does, and that the Pastor’s job is to help us cope with the difficulties life throws at us. And, clearly, that is part of it. But the real job of the Pastor is to equip the people of God to do pastoral work (Ephesians 4:12), and pastoral work is about helping people thrive – which is much more than just coping, and absolutely not the same as keeping everyone happy.

There is a real tension in Pastoral Care: we want our people to be happy and successful, but not too much. We are not supposed to fit too well into the world as it is, because we are called to be transforming the world into what it can become. As we pray and work to build God’s Kingdom, we inevitably come into conflict with the people and structures that oppose His Kingdom.

Pastoral Care is about helping people thrive in Kingdom terms, which sometimes means being happy and successful, but sometimes means persecution and suffering. Navigating this territory is difficult: we need both personal support and a deep Biblical understanding of our mission. Superficial teaching and glib proof-texts are not enough to sustain disciples on this journey, so careful Biblical teaching is a vital part of pastoral care.

When teaching the Bible, we are not just telling people Who God is and what He is like, we are not just giving advice on how to live: we are – or we should be! – providing people with an accurate understanding of how the world is, and therefore setting realistic expectations for the future.

We never teach people they will have a life of comfort if they put their trust in Jesus. We never actually tell people that if they come to Jesus, all their problems will be solved and all their difficulties done away with. We don’t need to actually teach these messages: most of the time, they pick up the ideas anyway.

These errors are never taught explicitly, but they are reasonable expectations if we preach a gospel of salvation, a gospel which does not require anything of me beyond intellectual assent to some doctrines, turning up on a Sunday morning, and the expectation that I will try to behave myself.

We preach a gospel of safety and protection from the eternal flame rather than a gospel of sacrificial commitment to a crucified Lord. And these expectations are reinforced when we focus in our songs and sermons on the promise of Heaven as an escape from the pains and problems of Earth, rather than the task of bringing Heaven down to Earth.

We are saved for a purpose. We are part of a movement which aims to overthrow the powers of this age, and those powers do not like it one little bit. Conflict, difficulty and suffering are to be expected.

The New Testament is clear on this point: it consistently delivers realistic expectations to anyone who reads it and takes the text at face value, but we still find people who have been good and faithful Christians for years, decades even, who fall away, or who become bitter and disillusioned because at some critical point, they feel that God failed to deliver in some way.

I have spent many hours talking and praying with Christians who were struggling because they felt that God had failed to protect them or their loved ones from harm. It is surprisingly common for Christians to feel let down because He has failed to deliver in some way; perhaps He has withheld some blessing which they felt they had the right to expect, maybe after years of service. But He never promised us things would go well – not even after we have served Him for many years. He never promised us an easy time. Quite the opposite, in fact: He repeatedly promises us opposition, suffering and death.

Paul starts his second letter to the Corinthians, not so much teaching this truth as assuming it.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. (2 Corinthians 1:3-5)

We know His presence and His comfort in our troubles, not despite them and not by avoiding them.

And we share His comfort because it is the sufferings of Christ we experience – not just the ordinary suffering of this life: pain, disappointment, grief and the rest. We share the additional suffering which arise from following the way of the cross, when people punish us for being honest or reject us for being kind to those who are considered to be undeserving and criticise us when we seek social justice, even when it will make us and those around us poorer as a result.

Following Jesus is costly, but it is possible through the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit, and it is worthwhile because in following Jesus we discover how to fully live. In walking with Jesus through the difficulties we experience the abundant life that He promised us.

Our Judgement

I believe a Kingdom focus will radically change our evangelism and pastoral care, but the real test is whether it affects the way we speak and act when we are not with our fellow believers, not engaged in ‘church’ business.

Christians are so often known for being judgemental in our attitudes. We find it so easy to support the status quo and criticise those whose lives are less than perfect. I wonder what might happen if we chose instead to follow the example of Jesus?

Jesus challenged the power structures and the popular movements of His day at every point where they were out of line with God’s Kingdom. Jesus was bitingly judgemental when He criticised the people who claimed to be religious but did not demonstrate God’s grace and love. So, as followers of Jesus, we too are called to be

judgemental towards those who are comfortable, cold and complacent, those who refuse to use their power to help those who suffer and struggle.

But Jesus was not only critical of the systems which kept people oppressed and judgemental towards those with power: He was also open and accepting to those who the good, religious people rejected. He partied with sinners. These were not good people whose faces didn't fit: they were often genuinely bad people. Zacchaeus is a prime example: he collaborated with the enemy and made his money by cheating his fellow countrymen.

We like to focus on the way Zacchaeus' life was changed through an encounter with Jesus, but we fail to recognise the scandal Jesus caused by choosing to become a guest in Zacchaeus' house. Jesus never condemned Zacchaeus for his sins. Instead, He loved Zacchaeus and spent time with him, accepting his hospitality while Zacchaeus was still a lying, cheating collaborator.

A few years ago, I saw a film with one brief incident which seemed to be a real prophetic challenge to the church. The hero, a good person but an unbeliever, has to go undercover in a small community, and poses as a church worker. Towards the end of the film, once it has become clear who he really is, a character tells him: I knew you were not from the church. The hero is intrigued: how did you know? As best I can recall, the answer went like this: I knew you were not from the church because you listened to me, and you didn't tell me what to do.

Jesus listened to people, and He didn't tell them what to do, but somehow we in the church today are known for precisely the opposite.

In some Christian circles, it is generally recognised that, as Christians, we are called to be counter-cultural, to speak and to live in ways which are different from those around us. But, if we want to follow Jesus, there will be times when we also need to be counter-cultural within the church.

Lifestyle

People can encounter the reality of the Kingdom of God as it is expressed in our words and our attitudes towards riches and success, towards the powerful and the powerless, towards the sick and the sinful. Our words are powerful and vitally important: we simply have to get them right.

But it is not just our words – our lives must also speak loudly.

People can see what matters to us by how we spend our money and how we spend our time, by the things we do and the ways we do them, by the people we spend time with.

The question of who we should spend time with is one which confuses a lot of Christians I talk with. If I were to paraphrase a lot of good evangelicals, they believe that the Exclusive Brethren got it right, but were a bit too extreme in their application of the truth. According to this view, Christians should only spend time with non-believers out of necessity, or in order to convert them.

So it is okay to encounter unbelievers when you go to the shops to buy food: you need to eat; it is okay to encounter unbelievers at your work: you need to earn money;

but any actual relationship with an unbeliever should be with the aim of getting them converted.

To be fair, there are Biblical passages which can be taken to support this kind of lifestyle. But by no stretch of the imagination does this describe the way Jesus lived. He believed he was called to love and bless everybody, in any way He could. He healed ten lepers, and one came back to thank Him. Healing the other nine was not a mistake: it was a demonstration of God's all-embracing love, a way of making God's Kingdom real in those people's lives.

We could say much more on this subject, but as a one line summary: we are called to avoid associating ourselves with sinful people in such a way that we identify ourselves with them rather than with Jesus. If your social group are racist bigots, or your social group despises the poor and the unsuccessful, then you are likely to absorb their attitudes and assumptions, and you are likely to be both accepting and reinforcing views and behaviours which run counter to the Kingdom.

The challenge for us is to love the sinner but hate the sin, to discover how to spend time with people whose views we deeply dislike, and make real for them the fact that God loves them and accepts them just the way they are (and, therefore so do we!), while not giving the impression that God doesn't care about the way they live or the impact of their behaviour on others.

We are called to love people just the way they are, while also holding out for them the possibility of deep and lasting change. In encountering and learning to love people who are deeply unlike me, I am also encountering God, the God who has already been present for and working in these people before I turned up, and maybe I am encountering something of God that is real and important, which I have not grasped before.

Every relationship is two-way: we give, and we receive. And, in my experience, when we meet people with the intention of giving them something, we often find that they give us far more.

And as I get to know and learn to love people whose views and actions I deeply dislike, maybe I will also discover what I know in my head but so often fail to know in my heart – that God's likes and dislikes are not necessarily the same as mine.

Since coming to Bristol, I have spent far more time with drug addict and alcoholics than I ever expected. I have also come to know and love some of the most amazing Christians. But, if I am honest, I have learned more about myself, more about God and more about His Kingdom through the drug addicts and alcoholics and people struggling with mental health issues than I have through my relationships with most of the Christians I have met over the years. I have encountered love in totally unexpected places, have grown through the challenges, and have met God in ways I could never have predicted.

Imitating Jesus

Learning to love people who are unlovely and not like me is, I would suggest, the single most important lifestyle commitment I can make, to help me become more like Jesus. Because that is exactly what He did.

As we read the New Testament, we discover a Jesus Who died for our sins, but more than that: we also discover a Jesus Who lived to bring the Kingdom of God, Whose life was devoted to making that Kingdom real for others, and Who invites us to give our lives to that same mission.

Being a Christian means Jesus is our God Whom we worship and He is our Lord Whom we obey, but He is also our example Whom we follow. Paul told the Corinthians to imitate him, as He imitated Jesus (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Imitating Jesus, walking the way of the cross, loving everybody without distinction – it will get us into trouble, it will cause all kinds of difficulties, because Jesus does not fit neatly into the world as it is, because Jesus is in the business of creating a different world. That is the nature of the abundant life we are offered, that is Kingdom living, and the door to this life is open to us all.

Next steps

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

- Is it helpful?
- Would you change anything?
- Would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form at mad-bristol or join the conversation on the *Strong Foundations* site.

- Web form: <http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>
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Last updated: 21:28 on 16 April 2019, revision: 0.15
Location: /home/paul/C/SF/main/SF_Kingdom_Living_1.odt