

Kingdom Living, Part Two

Introduction

We are called to preach and to live the good news of the Kingdom of God. We are building a Kingdom which looks like it is run by our loving Heavenly Father, and we are citizens of that Kingdom, who are increasingly being transformed into the image of His Son. This has to revolutionise our understanding of who we are, and affect every aspect of what we do.

It is not easy to grasp all that needs to change when we move out from the kingdom of this world – and of course, we can't grasp all of it straight away. However, there are some areas where we find it comparatively easy to explore this change: areas where we understand that change is needed – where we invest our energy, time and money, how we behave at work, how we love the people around us, and so on. These are all vital areas, but it is comparatively easy to find people, books and other resources to help us understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus in these areas of life.

On the other hand, there are some vital areas we struggle to talk about at the best of times: partly because they are difficult, and partly because they produce very strong emotions. Years ago, as a schoolboy on one of my first visits to a pub, I was told that three topics of conversation were banned: sex, religion and politics. It made sense: drink, divisive subjects and deep feelings are not a good combination.

Many people tiptoe very gently around these areas, even with close friends, because we know that, if you say the wrong thing, there is the possibility of hurting or offending the other person, and doing serious damage to the relationship.

But people desperately need to talk about important areas of their life, they need a safe space where they can talk about the things that matter to them, without fear of being ridiculed or rejected. And, maybe, we need to remember that no area of life can be so difficult or so divisive that we cannot seek to bring it under the Lordship of Jesus.

How we talk

Of course, we must be gentle, gracious and sensitive when we talk about subjects such as politics, religion and sex.

All these areas are dominated by tribalism: we identify with a particular group, and are expected to fight for our group, to attack members of opposing groups when they express their views or ask to be allowed to live according to their beliefs. But this is not the way of God's Kingdom.

One of the great things about being a Christian is that Jesus is Lord. One day, every one will recognise this and acknowledge Him. Before that day, it is not my job to put everyone right, to make sure they believe and do what they are supposed to. It is the job of the Holy Spirit to convict people of sin, and when I try to do God's job for him, things often go quite badly.

I can articulate the truth, as I understand it, to anyone who is interested in hearing; I can live it, teach it, explain it, discuss it and defend it. And all these activities help me to understand God's truth a little bit better. What I am not called to do – what we are not called to do – is to impose my understanding of the truth on others.

Jesus is Lord, and one day I will answer to Him for what I have done with the gifts He has given me. And all the people who are getting things so dreadfully wrong, as I see it, they too will answer to Him.

My suspicion is that His judgement on that day will be far kinder and more gracious than mine is right now. So I need to be very careful when I am tempted to pass judgement on people who disagree with me. And I hope that you, too, will be gracious if I say things you do not agree with.

Politics

Many people will tell you that the Christian faith has nothing to do with politics. According to this view, Christianity is all about the spiritual life, dealing with pure spiritual truth; while politics is all about the messy details of our physical life, dealing with corruption and compromise and deal making. People who tell you this have no understanding of Jesus and what He came to do.

Politics is at the heart of the Gospel. Here are four very brief snapshots, but there are many more.

When Jesus is born, the wise men come seeking the King of the Jews: Herod understood the political significance of this very clearly and murdered the children in an attempt to remove the political threat.

At the very start of His ministry, Jesus announced the coming of the Kingdom of God, and every one of His hearers understood that this was a deeply political claim. It was much more than just political, but if you take the politics out of it, you rob the message of its real life impact.

During His ministry, in response to a question about the tax, Jesus gave the familiar instruction: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." – which sounds very sensible and straightforward to us, but at the time was a denial of Caesar's absolute authority: a position which was deeply political, which rejected all the existing political options of His day, and which, once it was articulated, inevitably led His followers to a form of political engagement totally unlike anything the world had known up to that point.

And at the end of His Earthly ministry, the crime for which He was executed was written for all to see: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" – a political charge and a political act by a group of human institutions which understood that their power would be fatally undermined if the people believed and followed this King.

Jesus and the early Christians were political through and through. Of course, they were far more than just political, but when you try to take away the politics, you find you have nothing left but empty words.

Now, I recognise there is a general feeling that politics, in recent years, has become far more difficult: much harsher and more divisive, more selfish and cynical. In both the UK and America – to take two obvious examples – many people who feel angry and alienated have found their voice, and voted to reject politics as usual. A great many people feel frightened by the future, hurt and abandoned by the establishment that is supposed to look after their interests.

Is this harsh, divisive, selfish and cynical environment a place for Christians? Absolutely! Where else is the love and gentleness, kindness and generosity we find in Jesus more needed?

Social justice is a fundamental part of the Kingdom of God. Every follower of Jesus is called to seek justice, and that is an inherently political activity. We are not all called to devote a significant part of our attention to political activity, but we cannot in good conscience choose to ignore the political aspects of the work that Jesus did. Jesus calls us to follow Him, and we are not doing that if we pick and choose which bits we want to do.

People sometimes tell me they can't join a political party because they don't entirely agree with any of them. There are three responses to this.

Firstly: of course you don't agree with everything a political party stands for – nobody does! You don't join a party any more than you join a church because you agree with everything it says and does: you join the group that seems to be the best fit for your beliefs and values.

And then, with whatever time and energy you are called to devote to it, you seek to make the party closer to whatever you believe it should be. As I write this, two of our major political parties have just had leadership elections: the members chose the leaders, and the leaders will shape the direction of their parties and our nation. Only the members can do that: those who are involved get to shape the future.

And only the people who are actively involved with a political party can help to move it away from being a narrow-minded tribal group, fixated only on gaining power for itself and thwarting the plans of the other parties. We want our political parties to do what is right for the people, even when it is not in their own party interests. Again, it is only from the inside that such changes can take place.

But, secondly, you don't need to join a political party. I would encourage you to do so, if you haven't already, but it's not necessary. There are many groups working outside the established parties to achieve political goals. Extinction Rebellion is an obvious example. If you like the goals but not the methods adopted by one group, there are many other groups to choose from.

And, thirdly, you can't avoid politics by staying away from political parties and campaigning. In every human organisation and institution, the people involved engage in politics to some extent, even in Christian groups, denominations and churches – and some people would say, especially in Christian groups, denominations and churches. People have plans and agendas, sometimes open and sometimes

hidden, and want to recruit you to support their cause. You cannot avoid politics, but you can do is aim to do it well.

The key thing is: however and wherever you engage in politics, you do so as a citizen, first and foremost, of the Kingdom of God. You speak the truth and act in love, even when the people around you don't. You love your opponents, you don't slander or ridicule them, even if they behave that way towards you, because you know how Jesus would behave towards them and you are following Him and not them; you don't do what you know to be wrong, even in support of a good cause, because you can't build God's Kingdom with Satan's materials. You do not back your party or your cause 'come what may' because your primary allegiance is to Jesus.

And, as well as engaging in politics in a Godly way, you encourage others to do the same, because there is a great deal of injustice and structural evil in the world, and we need good people to get engaged in changing things because we know what happens when political activity is entirely given into the hands of the selfish and greedy.

Religion

There is a great deal we could say about religion and the Kingdom of God, so this has to be just a few short introductory notes.

There are many definitions of religion, but right now I would like to use the term to refer to an organised expression of spirituality. The Moslem religion includes things like Mosques, Imams, daily prayers and fasting during Ramadan. The Jewish religion includes Synagogues, Sabbaths, Rabbis, rituals, fasts and feasts; in Jesus' day the Temple and the Priests were important.

The Christian religion sits alongside all the other world religions. It is natural for Christians to compare them and tell the world: our religion is better than all the others! It is natural, but I believe it is deeply mistaken.

We have to ask ourselves: what is the place of religion in the Kingdom of God? Because, from what I can see, it doesn't have a place. At no point in the four Gospels does Jesus seem to be interested in setting up a new religion.

This is really important. I am not saying you have to believe me on this one: I am saying – go back to the Bible! Ask yourself: what did Jesus, and what did the early Church, have to say about religion, about the organised expression of spirituality? The answer may surprise you.

But be careful about the commentaries, if you use them. A lot of what has been written and taught on this subject has, as its starting point, the belief that Jesus got it wrong.

The story, as I have heard it many times, goes like this: Jesus believed that the Second Coming would happen in the lifetime of His hearers, so He did not think it was necessary to set up the structures that were needed to take His work forward. He did not tell us what to do when we meet, or how to choose our leaders. He did not give us a creed to believe or a liturgy to recite. The early Church was forced to make all these vital decisions – under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, of course – because Jesus failed to tell us what we needed to know when setting up a new world religion.

That is not the story I read in the New Testament. Jesus did not believe that the Second Coming would happen in the lifetime of His hearers: He believed that the Kingdom of God would come. And it did come, it has come, and it is still coming. The Kingdom is now but it has not yet arrived in all its fulness.

People only think that Jesus failed to tell us all the important details about running a religion because they believe the religious details are important. But there is absolutely no Scriptural basis for that belief.

If, instead of believing that Jesus got it wrong, we take the radical step of believing that Jesus got it right, then the Biblical account is consistent, and it makes sense.

Jesus did not teach about the organisational details, the rituals and ceremonies, the creeds and the qualifications for being a church leader, because He didn't think that any of that was important. He was not setting up a new religion, He was undoing our need for religion. As he told the woman at the well: it is not going to matter whether you worship in Samaria or in Jerusalem what matters is that you worship in spirit and in truth.

Jesus talked about religious activities, but He didn't tell us to do them – He told us how to do them. It is always: when you fast, do it like this; when you give alms, this is how to do it; when you eat together, this is what you should remember.

There is an assumption that His hearers would do all these things, but it is not a command. If I tell you: when you cross the road, remember to look both ways, I am not telling you to cross the road. And, of course, Jesus was speaking to Jews, so it was entirely reasonable to assume they would do those things. He is telling them: keep doing the religious stuff if you want to, but whatever you do, it has to be building God's Kingdom.

There is much that is good in all the major world religions. We are supposed to celebrate and respect what is good and honourable and true, and this must mean that we celebrate and respect it even when it is said by someone from another religion.

This does not mean that we agree with everything they say and do, but when they say things that are true and do things that are good, we have to agree with them and approve of what they do. If we fail to do so, then we are not following the truth, we are merely following a tribal group, cheering for our side and booing everything the other team does.

I hardly need to point out that every religion says: we are the best, join us. If Jesus is just a religious leader, up against the other big-hitters like Moses and Confucius and Mohammed and the Buddha, then we are simply engaged in a beauty contest. We say that Jesus alone has the words of eternal life, and they say pretty much the same about their big guys, too. Of course, the details vary – but, to most people, they are just that: details.

When we engage with people from other religions, we are not trying to get them to turn away from their religion and embrace a better religion. When we engage with people who do not follow any religion, we are not trying to get them to embrace religion and choose ours. Wherever people come from, we are trying to help them see that in Jesus both we and they find deeper truth for our minds and greater power for our lives than anything which can be found in any religion.

Sex

It is a useful discipline every now and then, to talk with people outside the church – to ask them what they think about us and what they think we care about. Almost certainly, what they think about us will be disappointing, and what they think we care about will be wrong. And then, we have to remember that we are the source of their confusion and misunderstanding, because we so often fail to communicate clearly through our words and our deeds.

This gap between perception and reality is clearly evident when it comes to sex. Many people outside the church think we are completely obsessed with the subject. And, when you think about it, that is not so surprising.

I know, because I attend church services each week, that I can go for years without ever hearing anyone talk about sex in a meaningful way. We do not talk in our public services about sex, but most churches are very clear about what is acceptable in this area when it comes to standards and social norms, when it comes to our expectations for what is acceptable in the lives of people who attend the church.

We may feel very strongly about peoples sexual preferences and partners, but I would urge you to go back to the Gospels and identify the activities that Jesus speaks out about, and how often He speaks about each area. How often does he choose to speak about money, and how often does he choose to speak about sex? And if Jesus did not think it was that important a subject, maybe we should not worry about it quite as much.

However, most people outside the church do not attend our services – instead, they read the newspaper headlines. And when you have a newspaper headline about Christians, more often than not, it is about sex.

Sometimes the story is about what people in the church have done: the vicar has run off with the choirmaster, or further child abuse by a church leader has been uncovered. We blame the people involved, but usually fail to look further: we know that sex is important to people and a powerful force in our lives, yet we fail to talk helpfully about it or give people space to talk openly about their difficulties and struggles. We do not provide the help that people need – how is that demonstrating God's love?

At other times, the story is about the things that people in the church have said. While the details vary, the messages that people hear from the church consistently boil down to just two things: we want to tell other people how to live, and we want to tell them that something or other they are doing is a sin. And yet we do not see either of these messages in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus told two people not to sin, and both times were private conversations with only that person present.

We are happy to stand up in public and label things as sins, but Jesus didn't. We need to ask: why? What do we think we accomplish when we announce to the world that something is a sin? It changes nobody's behaviour, but we convince a bunch of people that our God hates them.

Even when he was asked, Jesus refused to tell people what to do. "Tell my brother to share the inheritance with me." (Luke 12:13) His response: who appointed Me Judge between you?

Jesus did not tell the Rich Young Ruler to give up his wealth, He did not tell Zacchaeus to give to the poor, he did not tell the Woman at the Well to sort out her domestic arrangements. He did not even tell these people they were sinning.

So: are we called to tell other people how to live their lives? Are we called to tell other people that what they are doing is a sin? Or are we called to love people, just the way they are, no matter how much we may dislike or disapprove of their lifestyle? And how can we communicate love to people if we never meet them, talk with them and get to know them as people?

The religious people of His day criticised Jesus for being a friend of sinners. I don't see how we can consistently claim to follow Jesus and not lay ourselves open to the same charge. And that has to include people who are gay and lesbian and bisexual and transsexual and all the rest. Jesus loves everybody, and so must we, and they have to know it or we are not doing our job right.

More than that, it seems to me that Jesus is on the side of love for everyone and justice for everyone. So when, early in 2019, the government in Brunei decided to make it legal to kill people for being gay, do you think Jesus was on the side of the government? Or do you think Jesus was taking a step back and saying, "Not My problem"? And what was our reaction? Did we stand with Jesus? Or did we stand back, and by our inaction and lack of response say to the world that injustice and hatred don't matter?

Or does our lack of response say more about our commitment to tribalism, rather than the Kingdom of God? Members of the LGBT community know that they belong to a group which has been hated and persecuted for centuries. These days, in this country, people are no longer executed for being gay, but they are still regularly rejected by their families and forced out of their jobs. Do we care?

When we operate as a member of a tribe, then what matters to us is what happens to our people. In many tribal societies, murder is when you kill a member of your tribe; if you kill someone from another tribe, that might be a sad thing or a good thing, depending on how we feel about them, but it doesn't really matter because the dead person is not one of us.

When talking about LGBT people, some church leaders manage to talk about love rather than judgement, but even so, it is often expressed in terms of 'us' needing to love 'them'. It is very easy, even when we preach love, to do so with a tribal mentality. And it is very easy to forget, when talking about people whose sexual activity, preferences, desires and identity don't conform to our expectations, to forget that the 'them' we are supposed to be loving are also us. The Church has included LGBT people – probably, I assume, since the day of Pentecost, because Jesus opens the doors of His Kingdom to everyone.

In the Kingdom of God, everybody matters. Rich and poor, female and male, slave and free, Gentile and Jew, straight and gay, single and married, ugly and handsome, old and young. Our Heavenly Father loves everyone the same, and He calls us to do the same – no exceptions. We have to work to build a world where everybody is treated with compassion and justice, whether they are part of our group, our tribe, or not – because that is what we are called to, and to do anything else is to abandon God's Kingdom and turn our backs on Jesus.

In conclusion

We are supposed to be building a Kingdom which looks like it is run by our loving Heavenly Father, and we are called to be citizens of that Kingdom, who are increasingly being transformed into the image of His Son.

Questions about politics and religion and sex are deeply embedded in the life of Jesus and in the nature of His Kingdom. The people around us care about politics and religion and sex, their lives and ours are shaped by what happens in these areas.

We are children of God, children of the King. We have been accepted and adopted, we are – or we can be – secure in the certainty of His love. But He does not want simply to have us as His children: He wants the very best for us, which means that He wants to transform our lives.

If we want to follow Jesus, if we want other people to understand what His Kingdom is about and what He is like, then we have to work to make the Kingdom a reality in those areas of our lives, and seek to make it a reality for everybody. And as we do this vital work for others, so we learn and change and grow to be more like Jesus.

I'm not suggesting it is easy, I'm not saying I have all the answers. At times, following Him in these areas seems impossible. But I am absolutely convinced that this is what He calls us to, and if He calls us, and if we are willing to follow, then I have to believe that He will give us the guidance and the strength we need to walk with Him, and as we walk, to discover what it means to be a child of God.

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/>
- Strong Foundations: <http://strongfoundations.pbworks.com>

Copyright © 2019 Paul Hazelden
Last updated: 20:21 on 29 July 2019, revision: 0.35
Location: /home/paul/C/SF/main/SF_Kingdom_Living_2.odt