

Extending the Kingdom: Theological Foundation and a Call to Embrace the Tension

Author: Travis Lowe

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33, ESV).

Today we are going to discuss how we can expand the kingdom of God, but before we dive in I feel the need to make sure that we are all on the same page. Words are tricky things and can carry different meanings for different people. In the book, *Just an Ordinary Woman*, IPHC missionary Fannie Lowe tells the story of her first days in Hong Kong. She had been learning the Chinese language but had yet to understand that the same word in Chinese can have different meaning based on the tone of your voice. She wanted to impress the people around her at a conference they were attending. The leader was taking attendance and, in turn, each attendee would answer “present.” She decided to answer in Chinese. When her name was called, she proudly stood up and proclaimed in Chinese, “she had a knife.” When we speak of the Kingdom, I feel there are similar levels of misunderstanding. Jesus proclaimed the gospel of the Kingdom and commanded us to carry that gospel to all corners of the world. Yet, Tony Miller has correctly pointed out, “Many churches preach Jesus, but few preach what Jesus preached.”

Let’s step back for a moment and examine that statement. What other gospels could we be preaching instead of the gospel of the Kingdom? Pastor Jon Tyson once shared several other gospels that churches proclaim. From memory, I will do my best to share these with you.

Most of us are very familiar with the *gospel of salvation*. This one would go something like this, “God created Adam and Eve in His image and placed them in the Garden. Adam and Eve chose to sin, which brought death and brokenness to this world. They were worthy of the judgment of God. God began to form a covenant people through whom he would eventually send his Son. Jesus came and lived a perfect life, died on the cross for our sins, and rose from the grave securing our victory. We now have the opportunity to live with him forever.” Do you see anything wrong with this gospel? Most of the competing gospels are not wrong, they are just incomplete. Do you see what this gospel leaves out?

The glaring deficiency of this gospel is that there is no enemy. We hear very little talk of the evil one in this gospel. The problem this creates is that the Bible is clear about a battle that is taking place. If we do not acknowledge the evil one, who is the enemy? It would have to either be people or God. You see this when people blame God for the brokenness they encounter or when we, as Christians, have a “us versus them” mentality when we see lost people.

Second, let’s examine the *gospel of the church*. This gospel says that God loves a covenant people. He has chosen, before the foundation of the world, an elect people. In love, he predestined them to be holy and blameless. Throughout all generations, he has been gathering these elect, wooing them to himself, and in the fullness of time, he will call them to spend eternity with him. Once again, great stuff, lots of scriptural support, but lacking in fullness. Most competing gospels began as a response to areas of incorrect teaching. This one was developed to right the ship when much of the teaching of the church emphasized and wrongly, the place of works. The church was teaching that we first had to be sanctified (cleaned up) before we could be justified (saved). This teaching tried to bring balance by emphasizing God’s

role in salvation and the importance of faith. But it is also not complete. In this gospel, we can begin to believe that God is the enemy because of his sovereignty.

Let's look at a few more very quickly. You will be able to spot the deficiencies easily so we will not go into detail. The *gospel of morality* says that if we live a good enough life, which emphasizes what we do or don't do, we might be able to go to heaven one day. This gospel leads to being judgmental and produces constant fear about our eternal destination.

The *gospel of prosperity* places an emphasis on the benefits that God's people have with him, particularly in the here and now. It often sells the idea that we can have a perfect life if we just know how to work the system. Again, it was introduced when there was a deficiency of optimism in the church. It correctly pointed out the victory that Jesus secured but it was again incomplete. It often does not deal with the reality of this broken world and can lead people to think that all problems are their fault for not working the system correctly or not having enough faith. We can become the enemy.

Next, is the *gospel of justice*. God cares deeply for the poor. He came to alleviate poverty and to overturn all unjust power structures. Our role is to partner with God to bring about justice in this world. Ultimately, all will be just and Jesus will be King. Biblical but incomplete.

Now, take the one I saw most often growing up, the *gospel of heaven*. This one says that the world is terrible and irreparable. We are all sinners who have no hope of victory until we die. One day, hopefully soon, we will die and will finally get to go somewhere else.

In each of these, we see glimpses of the gospel of the kingdom yet not the fullness. So, what is the Kingdom? Here are a couple quotes to get us thinking in the right direction. Dr. Ladd has stated, "kingdom is a realm over which a king exercised authority." According to Dallas Willard, the Kingdom is "the range of God's effective will." This simply means the Kingdom is the place where what God wants, God gets. By this, we see that the gospel of the Kingdom involves establishing the rule and reign of God. So, we preach in such a way as to lead people into this realm. As Isaiah 40 states, "Every valley shall be lifted up" (v. 4). We reach out in missions and evangelism to witness God restore and redeem the lost. We teach people to live under God's rule. It is much like moving to a foreign country and learning a new language. N. T. Wright has noted, "Virtue is the language of the Kingdom." We disciple people to live in this new realm and one day when we step from this life into eternity it will feel like home. We will already have been living there, we will already know the language.

Then we exercise the victory of Jesus over his enemy. C. S. Lewis said, "Enemy-occupied territory—that's what this world is. Christianity is 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." There is a kingdom in opposition to Christ. This kingdom operates in all areas of life and society. Part of our call in Isaiah 40 is to join with Jesus and see that "every mountain and hill be made low" (v. 4). Just like King Josiah, we must commit to tearing down every high place. This means we battle injustice at every level, we stand against hate and offer love. We fight for the lowly, the despised and the rejected. We stand against the powers of this world. We work to set the world to right and are fighting from victory not just for it.

That is a grand vision of victory. The gospel of the Kingdom is summarized by Tyson like this: God gave us dominion and authority in the world by creating us as his image bearers to represent God in all of the creation. Adam and Eve were deceived by the enemy to sin because he wanted their authority. When they sinned it created a separation from God and the vacuum was filled by evil. We became slaves to sin. Jesus came as the second Adam. Not to regain God's authority but ours. Everything that Adam got wrong, Jesus got right. He lived a

perfect sinless life and died the death all people deserved, but for them, in their place, as a substitute. Sin and death now had no power over all who repent and believe the gospel. Christ then gives us his life. His heart is that we would regain a sense of authority as we respond to God's rule and reign, that God would use us as agents of restoration in this world, and that he would operate through us to drive out sin, sickness, Satan and death. Then at his return, we would reign with him on earth. A story of truly good news to the whole world.

So why do churches so rarely preach it? I believe many of us recoil from this gospel because of some bad teaching about the kingdom in the past. This has normally been the result of two opposite understandings the end times. The idea of the kingdom is often understood in terms of realms or ages. The Bible draws a clear distinction between "this age" and "the age to come." Some churches have built their theology around the fact that we are operating in "this age." This normally shows up as either Cessationists or Escapists. Some people teach that all the promises and power of the kingdom will be seen in the age to come. We are simply in a waiting period. There is no healing, no prophecy, and no power until the kingdom comes. Similarly, this belief makes many people focus almost entirely on the next world and ignore this world. You see this in churches that have become bunkers for the faithful to hide out until Christ returns. This creates a church culture of hopelessness and despair, while we are called to be children of the God of hope.

The other error has been churches that focus exclusively on the age to come. They see that Jesus announced that the kingdom has come. They base their theology around the fullness of the kingdom. This theology has gone by many names but it always ends terribly. These churches or movements often see themselves operating in the time after the millennial reign of Christ, on earth as ruler reigning over creation. It often lends itself to universalism, the belief that all are saved, and total dominion, the idea that this world will become perfect as we take dominion. The problem with this theology is that our life experiences ultimately do not line up with our beliefs. We recognize that evil is still at work and that realization often destroys our theology and even our faith.

This leaves us with an uncomfortable tension. Has the kingdom come? Is the kingdom coming one day? The best way to answer this question is to look at the life of Jesus. In the Garden of Eden, there seemed to be little separation between Earth and heaven. God simply walked from one the other. Seemingly no separation between this age and the age to come. When Adam and Eve sinned, a great divide resulted. In the Old Testament, the tabernacle became a place that partially restored this connection. An overlap of heaven and Earth, a place of intersection. In the Gospel of John, it says that Jesus came to dwell or to tabernacle among us. He became the place of intersection. The place where the kingdom of God invaded the kingdoms of this world. Then he called us to be citizens of this kingdom. Not just one day, but right now. We now found ourselves, much like he did, citizens of the earth but also citizens of heaven. He was the Son of God and the son of man. As a point of intersection, he could live among the broken but also have access to the perfect. We find ourselves living in the time in-between, in the overlap of the ages. Has the kingdom come or is it coming one day? The best answer we have is "Yes." It is already but not yet. We live in the kingdom now. We see its borders expanded now as churches are established and people come to faith in Christ, but the total consummation of the kingdom is still awaiting the return of the King. "In this life, there will be troubles." Many Jewish persons did not believe in Jesus because they thought that when the Messiah came everything would be set right immediately. It is clear to anyone that evil is still at work and the enemy is still loose.

So how do we live and work in this tension? Just as Jesus did. We go forth as a connection point for the world. We can be a connection point for the healing of the sick. We can be a connection point for justice, on earth as in heaven. When we, in faith, stand for victory and it does not work the way we think it should, when we see defeat, we can take the long view and know that one day God's victory will be complete and known to all. One day all sickness will be healed and all the powers of darkness will bow before the King. We are eternal optimists full of hope, hope in an all-powerful God who will fulfill all his promises. We bring heaven to bear on every situation and look forward to a day when this earth is alive in the fullness of God's grace. You see, the story doesn't end in heaven. It ends when a new earth and heaven exists that is full of the glory of God! Let's work toward that now and long for the day when we will see its fullness.

Outline

1. What Is the Gospel of the Kingdom?
 - a. Competing or Partial Gospels
 - i. Gospel of Salvation
 - ii. Gospel of the Church
 - iii. Gospel of Morality
 - iv. Gospel of Prosperity
 - v. Gospel of Justice
 - vi. Gospel of Heaven
 - b. Gospel of the Kingdom
 - i. Gospel of the Rule and Reign of God
 - ii. Exercising the Victory of Jesus over His Enemy
2. Confusion Surrounding the Kingdom
 - a. Cessationists or Escapists (This Age)
 - b. Kingdom Now (The Age to Come)
3. Embrace the Tension
 - a. Already but Not Yet (Inaugurated Eschatology)
 - b. Partnering with God to Extend the Kingdom
 - i. Healing (Restoration to Cultivation)
 - ii. Deliverance (Driving Out the Evil One)