

Examine the significance of 'The Kingdom of God' for mission and evangelism

The scope of this question is incredibly wide. There is extensive debate around what the Kingdom of God, mission and evangelism are, let alone the interplay between them and the significance of one for the other. This combined with the required brevity of this paper mean that I will not cover all the topics available. I will start by briefly defining my terms then examine selected aspects of the Kingdom of God and its significance for mission and evangelism. I will look particularly at two tension points within the Kingdom of God, as highlighted by Snyder¹ – Present vs. Future and Spirit vs. Matter. I have chosen these two tension points because I believe they have particular significance for the current practice of mission and evangelism and especially so in my field of ministry with young people.

The Kingdom of God is a challenging concept to define especially since scholars do not agree in their understanding of it.² It can simply be defined as the 'Reign of God',³ which points out that it is a reign and not a realm. However, the 'Kingdom' viewed as the 'Reign of God', would appear to be a definition rediscovered in the mid 20th century having been lost by the early church.⁴

The Kingdom of God can be further defined descriptively by using the characteristics and sphere of influence of the 'Reign of God'. Arias defines the 'Kingdom' descriptively covering most of the tension points outlined by Snyder below. He says that it is "multi-

¹ Snyder HA, *Models of the Kingdom* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991)

² Atkins R, *Lecture notes* (Cliff College, Sept 2001) P.1

³ Arias M, *Announcing the Reign of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984)

⁴ Atkins p.3

dimensional and all encompassing.”⁵ The 'Kingdom' is present and future; it is concerned with the individual and society as a whole. It affects all dimensions of human life – physical, spiritual, emotional, personal and interpersonal, communal and societal, historical and eternal. The 'Reign of God' also impacts all human relationships – those with our neighbour, nature and God. Arias defines the Kingdom as the 'new order of love'.⁶ He develops this further⁷ describing how the inbreaking reign of God is the restoration of community, the restoration of life, the promise of life and the celebration of life. It is good news.

Snyder says that in order to have a biblical theology/definition of the 'Kingdom' six areas of tension need to be held together. They are the degree to which the 'Kingdom' is:

1. Present vs. Future
2. Individual vs. Social
3. Spirit vs. Matter
4. Gradual vs. Climatic
5. Divine Action vs. Human Action
6. The church.⁸

He then takes these points of tension and suggests eight models of 'Kingdom'.⁹ He proposes in his preface that what we think about the Kingdom of God is a clue as to what we think about the gospel itself.¹⁰ As a result, what we think of the 'Kingdom' will influence our definition and practice of mission and evangelism. To Snyder then, the 'Kingdom' is by implication significant for mission and evangelism at a conceptual level because it shapes

⁵ Arias p.xv

⁶ Ibid. p.17

⁷ Ibid. p.22f

⁸ Snyder p.16

⁹ Ibid. p.16– They are the future, interior, heavenly, ecclesiastical, subversive, theocratic, transforming and utopian Kingdom

¹⁰ Ibid. - Preface

their definition. This also means that, depending on your model of 'Kingdom', different aspects of 'Kingdom theology' will have a greater significance than others in your definition and practice of mission and evangelism.

Snyder, Arias and Bridge¹¹ all comment that the general significance of the 'Kingdom' varies and so therefore its significance for mission and evangelism varies or is non-existent. Snyder describes how for some the 'Kingdom' is the hottest topic yet others would be puzzled as to why the issue has been raised.¹² Arias states that as a parameter or perspective for, or content of, mission and evangelism, the Kingdom of God has been virtually absent.¹³ In suggesting that the Kingdom of God is currently not significant, he also infers the various potential areas of its significance and therefore those that need to be taken into consideration when addressing the question posed for this paper.

The first area alluded to by Arias is in the **theoretical** realm – the parameters and perspectives. Bridge, by virtue of his comment that the Kingdom of God is 'so curiously missing from much evangelical language'¹⁴ suggests it is not significant for the theoretical articulation of evangelical mission and evangelism. Verkuyl on the other hand suggests that the 'Kingdom' is significant at a theoretical level by positioning the Kingdom of God as a theological imperative from which the mission agenda *must* find its 'focus and orientation'.¹⁵

The second area of potential significance alluded to by Arias is the **content**. How significant is the 'Kingdom' in the actual practice of mission and evangelism? There is also an area of significance relating to an imperative for the content of mission and evangelism – what one

¹¹ Ibid. – preface, Arias p.xv Bridge D, *Power Evangelism and the Word of God* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1987) p.149

¹² Snyder preface

¹³ Arias p.xv

¹⁴ Bridge p.149

¹⁵ Verkuyl J, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) p.198

should/ought to be doing/including. An example might be that if the 'Kingdom' is good news, the significance for the content of evangelism could be that the content reflects this by showing that the Kingdom of God and its message *is* good news. Alternatively, as an imperative, that the content *should* be good news.

Abraham adds a further dimension combining the theoretical and the practical. He makes the point that the significance of the Kingdom of God for evangelism and mission is that it lends them validity and importance. Evangelism is important because the Kingdom of God is important.¹⁶

So far we have looked at the Kingdom of God conceptually and its possible areas of significance. I will turn now to define mission and evangelism before later looking in more depth at particular aspects of the Kingdom of God and examining further its significance for mission and evangelism.

Mission and evangelism are as hard to define as the Kingdom of God. Bosch¹⁷ even goes as far as saying that mission is undefinable and that the most we can hope for are some '*approximations* of what mission is all about.' Bosch also draws the distinction between 'mission' as the *missio Dei* and 'missions' as the missionary ventures of the church.¹⁸ For Bosch mission includes evangelism.¹⁹ For him evangelism is proclamation and mission is a much wider concept. Others would disagree with both his assumptions and argue that mission is not necessarily the wider concept of the two and that evangelism is more than

¹⁶ Abrahams WJ, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) p.182

¹⁷ Bosch DJ, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 2000) p.9

¹⁸ Bosch p.10

¹⁹ Ibid. p.10

proclamation. Johnston claims that 'historically the mission of the church was evangelism alone'²⁰ and McGavran says that mission was 'evangelism by every means possible'.²¹

Both Abraham and Gruder²² say that evangelism is more than proclamation. For Abraham evangelism is 'that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time.'²³ Jones²⁴ develops this further linking to Arias' definition of the kingdom as a new order of love by defining evangelism as 'that set of intentional, loving activities governed by the goal of initiating persons into Christian discipleship in response to the presence of the reign of God.'

For the purpose of this paper I will take evangelism to be the definition put forward by Jones. I will define mission in the same way Bosch defines missions above but as a result of my definition of evangelism, mission would be those activities without the intention of initiating persons into discipleship.

We can see from the definitions of evangelism explored above that how you define evangelism in some ways determines the significance of the Kingdom of God for evangelism. For Abraham and Jones the Kingdom of God must be centrally significant, important and influential because it goes to the heart of what they believe evangelism to be, both in terms of the what, as well as the why. Bosch²⁵ also points out that historically our understanding of mission and evangelism has changed and he highlights this through his analysis of mission

²⁰ Johnston AP, *The Battle for World Evangelism* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1978) p.18

²¹ McGavran DA, 'What Is Mission?' (Glasser AF & McGavran DA, *Contemporary Theologies of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983) p.17

²² Abraham, Gruder D *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000)

²³ Abraham p.95

²⁴ Jones SJ *Lecture notes* (Cliff College, Sept 2001) p. September 10th

²⁵ Bosch

paradigms. As a result, historically the significance of the Kingdom of God for mission and evangelism has varied.

As well as our definition and practice of evangelism, Bosch also describes through analysing Vekuyls motives for mission²⁶ how our motives for evangelism also limit the significance of the Kingdom of God for evangelism. He says that if our motive for mission is conversion we narrow the reign of God to the sum of saved souls. Bosch also points out that if our motive is church planting then we equate the kingdom with the church. Therefore by having these motives we limit the significance of other aspects of the Kingdom of God for our evangelism. Bosch also discusses two other motives which impact directly on the tension points highlighted by Snyder that I will discuss in more depth shortly. Bosch shows that if we have an eschatological motive we focus individuals on the kingdom as a future reality and ignore the exigencies of life. Conversely if our motive is philanthropic we are challenged to seek justice in the world and thus equate the kingdom with an improved society.²⁷

Snyder²⁸ proposes that there are six tension points which need to be held together in order to have a biblical theology/definition of the Kingdom of God. I will examine two of these points now in more detail and examine their significance for the current practice of mission and evangelism.²⁹

Future vs. Present

Jesus taught his disciples to pray in the Lords prayer 'your kingdom come.' The kingdom was

²⁶ Bosch p.5

²⁷ Compare Snyders models of future kingdom and transforming kingdom

²⁸ Snyder

²⁹ I am taking the tension points in turn for the sake of this paper. Snyder outlines that our view of 'Kingdom' will be a position between six interconnecting points rather than in six separate points on six continuums. There is significant influence and interplay between the tension points I explore here and those I have omitted.

not yet. It was a future reality. Yet this has to be balanced with phrases such as 'The kingdom of God is at hand/near' which appear repeatedly on the lips of Jesus.³⁰ This highlights the tension – is the Kingdom of God a future or present reality or somehow a combination of the two? Where your theology of the kingdom lies on this continuum will influence what your evangelism and mission looks like. In examining this further I will demonstrate that the Kingdom of God is significant in influencing our practice of evangelism. I will also show that it is significant in that by holding a narrower concept of kingdom our scope for mission and evangelism is narrower, less holistic and I would argue (along with Snyder) as a result less biblical.

If we hold a model of Kingdom that is mostly future we have a model that is one of ultimate judgement and ultimate reconciliation. It is a model in which everything wrong in the world would be put right, but only in the future. As a result it is an inherently 'spiritual' model concerned with spiritual things. This model of Kingdom is significant for mission and evangelism at a variety of levels – content, motivation and justification.

Since the model of a future kingdom is eschatological by nature it leads to a very spiritual content. It means that evangelism would be concerned with the 'salvation of souls' and other aspects of a person's being would be of lower priority. What would be the point of social action, or emotional/psychological care, since it would not lead to a person's salvation or experience of the kingdom, which here is a spiritual affair? The future model places the emphasis on 'getting saved' and has the potential to lead to a 'conveyor belt' approach: once their salvation is dealt with move on to the next person. If it is held that this approach is

³⁰ For example Mt 3:2, Mk 1:15, Lk 10:9

impure³¹, then the significance of this interpretation of the Kingdom of God is that it is a negative influence on the practice of evangelism.

The predominantly future model of Kingdom does have positive influences on mission and evangelism. It places a sense of urgency on the practitioner, especially if this is combined with certain nuances of eschatology. If Jesus were to come back tomorrow, then how much greater the urgency and incentive to do evangelism. Conversely taking Jones' definition of evangelism, this model of Kingdom would place high validity on evangelism and low validity on mission. Unless the activities were about initiating people into discipleship, what would be the point of other mission since it would be a drain on resources from evangelism, which would have to be the priority.

The future model of Kingdom would also be significant in shaping the content of the message. Since this model is one of ultimate judgement, that would play a central part in the call to and motivation for repentance as would the promise of ultimate reconciliation. For those who are dissatisfied with their current situation in a fallen world the future model of Kingdom brings the promise of better things ahead, but only in the future. A hope, but a deferred hope: motivating for some, inadequate for others.

If ones model of 'Kingdom' on this continuum lay more in the present, your practice of evangelism and mission would be different. It would open up the possibility of experiencing the benefits of the reign of God here and now. The present reign of God would open up the possibility of 'Signs and Wonders' as part of evangelism and mission, when they are viewed

³¹ 'Impure' in the sense of Verkuyl's motives for fulfilling the missionary task. Verkuyl p.163f

as evidence of the current reign of God over sickness, demons etc..³² A 'present' model of kingdom would also be significant in granting an imperative for evangelism and its activities to engage with the exigencies of life. It would also add validity to mission as I am defining it. The current spiritual, emotional, physical, social needs of a person/society (including creation) would need to be considered and acted upon as priority over future, eschatological spiritual needs. A 'present' emphasis therefore opens up the possibility, importance and validity of social action as part of evangelism. This is a point I will develop later when looking at the spirit vs. matter tension point.

The present model of Kingdom is significant for the content of evangelism in that it must include the promise that God and his Kingdom are no longer remote.³³ Klaiber summarising Jesus' message by the 'Kingdom of God is at hand', can be seen to succinctly summarise what the content of evangelism and mission must be when including a present aspect of Kingdom. He says, 'It is the announcement of the redemptive nearness of God which is breaking in through Jesus' works.'³⁴

This is particularly significant for work with young people, who in this emerging post-modern paradigm are desperate to experience God and not just be told about Him, or merely be pointed towards a future encounter. Indeed Gnanakan goes so far as to say that unless our proclamation makes an impact now we are only playing with words.³⁵

³² Wimber J with Springer K, *Power Evangelism* (Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992)

³³ Newbigen L, *The Open Secret* (London: SPCK, 1995) p.34

³⁴ Klaiber W, *Call and Response* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) p.30

³⁵ Gnanakan K, *Kingdom Concerns* (Leicester: IVP, 1993) p.114

Modern scholars would tend to agree that the Kingdom is not just one of either future or present, rather it is both now and not yet.³⁶ The significance of this for evangelism and mission is that it also means the practices of evangelism cannot be just one of either future or present. Evangelism cannot simply be concerned with spiritual matters of the future, but equally mission, though valid, could not simply be concerned with welfare but must point towards a future and spiritual dimension.

I turn now to examine the significance of the Kingdom of God for mission and evangelism by exploring the tension between the Kingdom being spirit and being matter.³⁷ In the same way that the Kingdom is now and not yet, Snyder outlines that a biblical theology would hold spirit and matter in tension and not simply view them as alternatives.

A model of Kingdom that leans more towards spirit than matter would see evangelism and mission as a spiritual activity and the content of that activity as spiritual. In fact if held extremely would probably not see the need for physically based mission such as social action.³⁸ This model has, I believe, some positive influences on evangelism. By emphasising the spiritual it connects with our 'deep hunger and thirst to know God'.³⁹ A spiritual model also opens up the possibility of the supernatural intervention of God in evangelism and mission through signs and wonders, since they are potentially spiritual in nature.⁴⁰ A spiritual model would also be significant in defining the content of evangelism and its message. The

³⁶ See particularly Ladd GE *A Theology of the New Testament* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1991) as an influential text in developing the now and not yet balance.

³⁷ Snyder (p.16) cites the following verses as illustrative 1 Cor 15:50, Jn 18:36 vs. Lk 4:18-21 and Rev 5:10

³⁸ I refer you back to pp 7-9 where this was also partly discussed under the future vs. present tension point

³⁹ Snyder p.40, he quotes in the context of his model of interior kingdom.

⁴⁰ This would arguably relate to cases of demons and deliverance; healing would still be about impacting more than just the spiritual part of an individual.

spiritual acts of Christ would be emphasised for example the atonement; as would a persons spiritual responses for example repentance and subsequent forgiveness.

However, in my view, the significance of a predominantly spiritual model is more negative for mission and evangelism. This model would emphasise the spiritual nature of the task of evangelism and potentially omit others. This may be demonstrated by the practice of evangelism where the main objective is to get a person to say the 'sinners prayer' and then the job is done.⁴¹ This is a far from holistic approach towards a person, in essence ignoring that they are also physical, intellectual and emotional beings as well as spiritual.

The opposite tension point for Snyder was matter. A model of the Kingdom emphasising this perspective would emphasise what is commonly referred to as social action and social justice. It would be concerned with the poor, with those marginalised and those oppressed, concerned with the physicalness of our existence. Arias quotes the Melbourne conference⁴² in saying that this model is significant by leading to an imperative for mission and evangelism that we must dare to be present at the bleeding points of humanity. Gnanakan points out that this imperative comes from the mission of Jesus. His proclamation of the Kingdom was accompanied by being positively involved in every area of human life.⁴³ Gnanakan also says that this divine imperative is re-enforced by practical reality and efficacy, in that the world will want to see a concrete demonstration of the message.⁴⁴ The significance of a 'matter' emphasis would be that our evangelism and mission would have to meet the physical and non-spiritual needs of individuals as well as their spiritual needs. To paraphrase Newbingen

⁴¹ I appreciate this style of evangelism is also influenced by the theology of conversion and definition of what evangelism actually is, amongst many other things.

⁴² Arias p.82

⁴³ Gnanakan pp.113-114

⁴⁴ Gnanakan p.129

it would necessitate the presence as well as proclamation of the Kingdom.⁴⁵ This is to me a far healthier approach to mission and evangelism than a more 'spiritual' approach.

A biblical approach, however, would hold spirit vs. matter in tension and not view them as alternatives. The resulting model has much significance for current mission and evangelism and for my ministry to young people. Young people have concerns about social justice, the environment, the poor, and the marginalised and yet have a deep desire to experience God. Holding the spirit vs. matter tension is liberating for our practice of mission and evangelism to this culture for two reasons. Firstly, it engages young people where they are, meeting their needs, their aspirations and fears. It presents a picture of God that they find attractive and a model of Kingdom of which they want to be a part.⁴⁶ Secondly, it is a model that they want to share: it inspires them to do mission and evangelism.⁴⁷ It is a model that takes people from outside the Kingdom and makes them agents of the kingdom.⁴⁸

When holding these four points of tension I have explored together, they have a combined significance. We would have a future hope but a present reality: a present reality that is both spiritual and practical. This in turn would influence the content of our mission and evangelism, as well as the way we do it.

To conclude, I have shown that the Kingdom of God is significant for evangelism and mission, despite the challenge of defining these terms. It is significant through its influence

⁴⁵ Newbingen p.40

⁴⁶ In a more extensive paper other tensions to explore, especially those that have a particular significance for mission and evangelism involving young people, would be the tension between the individual and social nature of the Kingdom. This would be significant given the extreme individualism within youth culture and yet the deep need and desire to belong and to have community.

⁴⁷ For instance M2K (Soul Survivor in Manchester) saw thousands of young people involved in a multi agency mission and evangelism event.

⁴⁸ Abraham p.182

on both the definition and practice of evangelism and mission. I have also shown how the significance of particular aspects of Kingdom theology on evangelism and mission varies dependent on where we are on a continuum between theological tensions. The significance of certain biases I have also shown to be less positive in our practice of evangelism and mission. A narrower interpretation of the Kingdom of God means that we limit our view of people and therefore limit the areas of their lives that the reign of God can impact. The Kingdom of God is ultimately significant because it is the content of our witness to Jesus.⁴⁹

Word Count: 3,289

⁴⁹ Arias p.59

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Abbreviations

IVP = Inter Varsity Press

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