

Ch 3 God's 'Kingdom' Society

One Heart and Soul

Christian Community for the 21st Century

A MULTIPLY
'Let's talk' book
for those wanting
to experience
living Christianity

One Heart and Soul

Trevor Saxby



☪ Jesus Christ is raging, raging in the streets,
Where injustice spirals and real hope retreats.
Listen, Lord Jesus, I am angry too.
In the Kingdom's causes, let me rage with You. ☪

Iona Community

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Jesus brought good news. This means a whole lot more than being saved from our sins. It is 'the good news of the kingdom of God'.¹ The word translated 'kingdom' has the sense of rulership. Jesus, the Messiah, was bringing in His kingdom - a whole new society under His headship. The early chapters of Acts record the birth of that new society in the Church. Two powerful forces combined: the teachings of Jesus and the bubbling river of Holy Spirit life. This led into a new social order with its own character, structure and standards. These often went right against 'normal' society.

This theme runs throughout the bible. The whole of creation was to be God's kingdom. Sun and moon, sea and land, and all life on earth were to be in harmony under His rule. Mankind was to have rulership over the creation, subdue it and tend it.²

When Adam and Eve sinned, this harmony was wrecked. Yet God still wanted His kingdom on earth. He chose the Israelites for the privilege of returning to His rulership. Time and again He had to remind them that, as such, they were different. 'I have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.'³ They were not to live like the nations around them, but were to pioneer a new lifestyle, such as befitted a people set apart by God.

Israel constantly fell short of this high calling, turning aside to other gods and incurring God's judgement. Yet His vision remained the same, and through the prophets He spoke of a time to come when all would be under His perfect rule. 'The wolf shall dwell with the lamb... And a little child shall lead them... They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.'⁴ This was not held to mean heaven (the Jews in Old Testament times had little concept of personal resurrection and an afterlife), but to a time when God's kingship would be re-established among men through the coming of the promised Messiah.

Before Jesus was born, His mother Mary sang a prophetic song which added a key element to the picture. 'He [God] has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; He has filled the hungry with good things,



¹ Luke 8:1; ² Genesis 1:26; 2:15,19;

³ Leviticus 20:26; ⁴ Isaiah 11:6-9;

and the rich He has sent empty away.⁵ Jesus, as Messiah, would bring in the long-awaited kingdom of social justice and brotherhood foretold by the prophets - with a particular call to the poor.

Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus was always speaking about His kingdom: a new social order under His direct rulership. He also demonstrated it by welcoming the outcasts and forming a new 'family' out of beggars and harlots, rulers, tradesmen, noble ladies, political activists and tax-collectors. He kept knocking over the 'normal' religious teachings of His day: 'You have heard how it was said..., but now I say to you...'⁶ He had to jolt people out of complacently following what everyone else did, home in on their heart attitudes and motives, and focus their eyes on what God really wanted.

'My kingdom is not of this world', Jesus declared.⁷ In fact, He taught that the ruler of this present world is the devil.⁸ This can come as quite a shock. It is easy to think of the world we live in as somehow neutral, and that we can choose to use it for good or evil. Indeed that's often preached from the pulpit. But it's not what the bible says! Jesus plainly stated that there are two kingdoms on earth: His own, and the kingdom of this fallen world. We are either in one or the other.

This world is not neutral. 'The whole world is in the power of the evil one.'⁹ That includes its political and economic systems, its entertainments, its standards and values. Like it or not, the fact remains that, from birth, we are already citizens of the wrong country, under the wrong king. We don't control him; he, through his spirit and his value systems, controls us.

So Jesus puts it plainly: 'You are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world.'¹⁰ We are citizens of a different kingdom, living in the midst of a system that is no longer our home. 'Our citizenship is in heaven.'¹¹ That's why, in His amazing prayer in John 17, Jesus spoke of His followers being in the world but not of it.¹²

In these ways Jesus probes our motives. 'Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord', and not do what I tell you?'.¹³ If He really is our Master, then He controls our time, our money, our leisure, our relationships, our possessions - the lot! It is up to us to pay the price and bring in new patterns and structures in our living, to allow Him to be Lord.

The first Church had this in its genes. 'Save yourselves from

⁵ Luke 1:52-53

⁶ Matthew 5:21,27,33;

⁷ John 18:36; ⁸ John 14:30;

⁹ 1 John 5:19; ¹⁰ John 15:18;

¹¹ Philippians 3:20;

¹² John 17:11,14; ¹³ Luke 6:46;

this crooked generation', cried Peter on the Day of Pentecost.¹⁴ They joined their lives together and became a living demonstration of a new social order - the kingdom of God. Paul writes: 'He [God] has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.'¹⁵ We need to be rescued from the rule of the wrong master, and transferred to the right kingdom, where there is social justice and genuine love. No wonder Jesus spoke of a 'violent' entry into the kingdom.¹⁶ Being 'saved' is a lot more than having your sins forgiven; your whole world has to be turned upside down! It was this very charge of subverting the cultural values of the day that drew hatred on the heads of the first Christians.¹⁷

When Jesus called His disciples, they left behind everything that was 'normal'. What did they get in return? Jesus Himself, and each other - a committed team pledged together, learning to be more and more one. That was the Church in embryo. After Pentecost, the Holy Spirit made the believers 'one heart and soul',¹⁸ and they remained together. Many who had only come as pilgrims to a festival now decided to stay put! The events described in the early chapters of Acts seem quick, but scholars reckon it was some eight years before persecution and scattering began. For eight years, apparently, the Church did nothing but devote themselves to teaching, fellowship, prayer and the covenant meal.¹⁹ Had they missed the point? By today's norms they should have been out pursuing some Christian agenda. No! Led by the Holy Spirit, they had grasped a whole new reality. They pursued the very things which would forge them together as a powerful corporate unit, filled with the Holy Spirit. And God saw to it that many were drawn to this attractive new brotherhood.²⁰

God's rulership is wider than the Church, of course. All creation longs for the time when God's pure rule will be established.²¹ The day will come when all things, on earth and in the heavenly realm, will be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.²² Then the cry will go up: 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord!'²³

The Church is to be a prophetic people, chiefly through its lifestyle. Witness is more about what we are than what we say or do. We must demonstrate the attractiveness of having Jesus as our ruler. He believes in structures (the 'new wineskin' of Matthew 9), but they must be humane

¹⁴ Acts 2:40 ¹⁵ Colossians 1:13;

¹⁶ Matthew 11:12; ¹⁷ Acts 17:6;

¹⁸ Acts 4:32; ¹⁹ Acts 2:42;

²⁰ Acts 2:47; ²¹ Rom. 8:19;

²² Colossians 1:20;

²³ Revelation 11:15;

and flexible. He believes in authority (even if 21st century culture doesn't), but insists that it is humble and fair. 'Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.'²⁴ And He is inclusive, not exclusive. He lets the interaction of hearts, in the life of the Holy Spirit, sort people out. In these days of individualism, where multi-million pound industries set out to pamper our every whim and selfishness, Jesus calls us to come out and form a new kingdom, where selfishness is laid down and everyone finds the simple joy of giving and caring. This kingdom offers an honoured place for all.

If all this seems fanciful, or remote from 'real' Church life, then that only underlines how watered down a picture of Church we often have. Dare we ask the Holy Spirit to help us take two steps back from our own Christian experience and look at it honestly in the light of the gospel of the Kingdom of God? Are we really God's intended 'drop-outs' from a fallen system, now pioneering a new lifestyle with the attractiveness and sacrificial commitment of Jesus? We must honestly assess whether what we offer to those outside is sufficiently different, human, spiritual, sold-out and united to deserve their attention. Which begs the next question: whether we are willing to pay the price to get there.

²⁴ Ephesians 5:21



A people set apart for God