

KINGDOM VISIONARIES

PART 3: JESUS AND THE APOSTLES



T. M. MOORE

A ReVision Resource from The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *Kingdom Visionaries Part 3*

Welcome to *Kingdom Visionaries Part 3*, the final set in our 3-part series looking at the vision of the Kingdom of great Biblical leaders. *Kingdom Visionaries Part 3* is one of our *ReVision* studies in Biblical worldview.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Be willing to take more than one session on a lesson if it will allow you to delve more deeply into the subject matter.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Jesus: Then and There, Here and Now

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Matthew 4.17

Kingdom come

Undoubtedly Jesus had the clearest vision of the Kingdom of God of all the Kingdom visionaries we've seen or will see. We've already observed that Jesus regarded the Kingdom as of the highest priority for His followers. We are to "seek first" the Kingdom, not as the first in a series, but the first in everything we do.

What Jesus accomplished during His earthly sojourn was but a foretaste of what He would do following His resurrection and, ultimately, His return in glory.

The full and final unfolding of the Kingdom of God awaits the day of Christ's return. That stage of the Kingdom begins with the gathering of all God's elect – those who are asleep and those who yet remain (Matt. 24.29-31; 13.36-43). Then, together with Him, His chosen people will return to overthrow the last remaining enemies of God and, passing through the judgment of the Lord, enter into everlasting glory and bliss. Then, in a new heavens and new earth, they will dwell with Him in His Kingdom forever (Rev. 19.6-21; 1 Thess. 4.13-17).

Kingdom coming

In the Kingdom which is coming Jesus' followers will reside with Him in His Father's house, in dwellings specially prepared for them by Jesus (Jn. 14.1-3). There they will share in the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, for they will see Jesus as He is and will be like Him (Jn. 17.20-24; 1 Jn. 3.2).

The Kingdom which is "then and there" will be without sorrow, pain, mourning, or sin (Rev. 21.3, 4). He Who is making all things new will abundantly provide for His citizens then – living water without payment (Rev. 21.6) and the indescribable joy and pleasure of being in the presence of God without obstruction or interruption (Rev. 21.7; cf. Ps. 16.11). The saints of God will feast eternally with their King and rule with Him in perfect righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Lk. 22.28, 29).

In the new heavens and new earth, the citizens of Christ's coming Kingdom will realize their full potential and God's original design, in a world of perfect but ever-increasing beauty, goodness, and truth.

This is the Kingdom and city to come, to which all are journeying who have been redeemed of the Lord (Ps. 84). It is a place of unutterable beauty, bounty, and brilliance (Rev. 21, 22), and it is the hope of all who follow Jesus in this life.

Jesus saw this hope spread out before Him throughout the course of His earthly ministry. By focusing on it and never losing sight of the Kingdom to come, Jesus was able to run His race, despising the cross and the shame, to sit down at the right hand of the Majesty on High (Heb. 12.1, 2; Ps. 22).

This is the same hope toward which we press as His followers.

Kingdom now

But the Kingdom of God, as Jesus envisioned it, was not simply for then and there. Jesus announced a Kingdom that had come. His preaching and teaching lead us to understand that the Kingdom is very much a "here and now" reality, that which is to be sought above, within, and through everything else in our lives.

We see this in the way that Jesus declared the Kingdom of God to be “at hand” or “near” or even “in your midst.” Jesus made it clear that the long-awaited reign of God had come to earth in the Person of its Heir-apparent – “Him Whose It Is” (Shiloh, Gen. 49.8-10). In His preaching and miracles Jesus heralded the new day which the prophets had foreseen. He declared that the promised latter rains had begun to fall, and the storm of judgment was at hand. Jesus called on all who heard Him to make themselves ready through repentance and new birth to enter this new reality which had come to earth with Him.

By casting out demons Jesus particularly showed that the centuries-long reign of the father of lies had come to an end. He had come to bind the strong man, and now, with the bringing-near of His own reign, Jesus began to plunder the devil’s holdings in order to fill up His own Kingdom according to the wisdom and power of God (Matt. 12.22-29).

Jesus insisted that some of those who listened to His preaching would not taste death before they had seen the Kingdom of God coming among them (Lk. 9.27). The idea that the Kingdom of God is *merely* a “then and there” phenomenon, something postponed for after His return, is not consistent with what Jesus taught or the expectations He held out for His followers concerning their own lifetimes.

So, while we look forward to a full and glorious manifestation of the Kingdom, and of our place in it, in the new heavens and new earth, now, in the present, we must seek to lay hold on that Kingdom as our highest priority in life. For the Kingdom is both “here and now” as well as “then and there.”

For reflection or discussion

1. What is your understanding of the “there and then” aspect of the Kingdom of God? Do you spend much time thinking or praying or talking with other Christians about this?
2. We are citizens and ambassadors of the “here and now” Kingdom of God. How does such a calling affect your daily walk with and work for the Lord?
3. What is it about the Kingdom of God that makes it such “Good News”?
4. How would you counsel a new believer to make seeking the Kingdom more of a priority for every aspect of his life?
5. What are your goals for this study? What do you hope to learn to improve your vision of the Kingdom of God?

Next steps: How much does the “then and there” aspect of the Kingdom inform the way you live in the here and now? Talk with some Christian friends about this question.

Prayer:

2 Jesus: Know the Lord

“And this is eternal life, that they may know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” John 17.3

A threefold vision

All who understand the “here and now” aspect of the Kingdom of God will exert themselves to realize as fully as possible the benefits of the reign of King Jesus in their daily lives.

Which means that those who serve King Jesus must strive and struggle and seek every day to gain more and more of what is theirs in the Kingdom of God. This idea is implicit in every parable of Jesus concerning the Kingdom. We may possess it, like a pearl of great price or a treasure buried in a field. The Kingdom grows and bears fruit, attracting others and gaining power. We must lay hold on it with violence, forcing our way ever more deeply and richly into the reign of Jesus Christ and His glory (Matt. 11.12; Lk. 16.16).

Jesus’ vision of the proximity of the Kingdom, therefore, was a threefold vision: The Kingdom is yet to come in all its fullness; nevertheless; at the same time, the Kingdom is unfolding in our midst even now; and thus every follower of Jesus Christ must make it his primary concern to seek and attain to more and more of the Kingdom of God every day of his life.

Then and there, here and now, more and more: This is how we must think about the Kingdom of God and our involvement in it.

All things new

It is impossible to read the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ and fail to see that He was promising and calling people to an altogether new way of life. The Kingdom of God, as He envisioned and taught it, was a new realm, entered by the new birth, and issuing in a new life of freedom in God’s truth, unto the praise of God’s glory.

In order to realize this life one must be born from above, by the Spirit of God (Jn. 3.5-7), and, from that moment, to deny himself, take up his own cross daily, and follow Jesus in pursuing the priorities of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 16.24, 25).

But what are those priorities? What should we, the heirs and citizens of the Kingdom, embrace as the guiding framework, template, and pathway of our lives?

According to our Lord Jesus Christ, there are two primary and overarching priorities attendant to citizenship in the Kingdom of God: Know the Lord, and bear lasting fruit.

Let’s have a look at the first of these.

Know the Lord

Eternal life – life in the Kingdom of God – consists in knowing God and Jesus Christ (Jn. 17.3). This is no mere intellectual achievement. Rather, the kind of “knowing” envisioned here is deeply intimate, personal, and transforming.

To know Jesus Christ is to participate, in a mystical and spiritual way, in His body and blood (Jn. 6.48-56). It is to know the experience His resurrection power, and to understand and obey His Word (Matt. 22.29). To

know the Lord is to become a child of God (Jn. 1.12), to call upon Him as Father, and to pray to Him about everything (Matt. 21.22; Jn. 16.24); it is to receive His good gifts, and to use them, like wise stewards, for the increase of His glory (Lk. 11.11-13; Matt. 25.14-30). It is to be indwelt by His Spirit so that the life of God is formed increasingly within us (Jn. 14.15-17).

Equally important, to know the Lord is to be known by Him, to have Him so personally and intimately a part of our lives, that His presence is with us always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 7.21-23; 28.20). We can accomplish many ostensibly religious and good things without knowing the Lord. But unless we know Him, and are known by Him in return, we shall have no part in His Kingdom.

To know the Lord is thus to “walk in step” with Him, embracing His mission, seeking His vision, relying on His Word and Spirit, and living according to His holy and righteous and good Law (Matt. 5.17-19). In the Kingdom as Jesus envisioned it, all the children of God were gathered to Him, like chicks to their mother, taking refuge in the shelter of His grace and truth, feeding on the gifts to which He brings them, and growing to maturity in order to extend His offspring and Kingdom citizens (Matt. 19.13-15; 23.37).

We may only know God through Jesus Christ, by receiving Him as the promised Word, Savior, and King, sent from the Father for our redemption and restoration (Jn. 14.6). Knowing the Lord by taking on the yoke with Jesus Christ, and learning from Him (Matt. 11.28-30), is thus the first priority for every citizen of the Kingdom of God.

For reflection or discussion

1. Why is “know the Lord” a better way of thinking about eternal life than “going to heaven when I die”?
2. What does it mean to know the Lord in a “mystical and spiritual” way? Is this knowing the Lord any less real merely because it is mystical and spiritual? Explain.
3. “We can accomplish many ostensibly religious and good things without knowing the Lord. But unless we know Him, and are known by Him in return, we shall have no part in His Kingdom.” Do you agree? Explain.
4. Meditate on 2 Peter 3.18. What does it mean to grow in the knowledge of the Lord? How can we know when we’re actually growing like this?
5. Imagine an unbelieving friend asks you what it means when you say you “know the Lord.” What would you say in response?

Next steps: What would you recommend to a new believer as a proper course for growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3.18)? Ask a church leader to help you flesh out your answer to this question.

Prayer:

3 Jesus: Bear Fruit

“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain.” John 15.16

Chosen for a reason

Citizenship in the Kingdom of God ensues when the Lord Jesus calls a lost sinner to repentance and faith, bestowing the gift of the Spirit, according to His Word, and granting new life in the Kingdom of God. All who are thus born from above are equipped with all they need to begin knowing the Lord ever more intimately, personally, and with transforming power.

But why has Jesus called us to the Kingdom? What should result from our coming to know the Lord?

He Himself explains, as we see in our text. The intimacy we enjoy with God, when it is true knowledge of Him, will result in fruit in our lives. God is glorified when His children bear lasting fruit (Jn. 15.8); thus also His children prove themselves to be such, and therefore to be justified in laying hold on His promises and seeking more of His Kingdom (Matt. 7.12, Jn. 15.8).

But in what does this fruit consist? We may divide our fruit-bearing into two sub-categories – fruit from within, and fruit borne without.

Fruit from within

The fruit Jesus brings forth within us is of two primary sorts, righteousness and love.

Righteousness. Jesus expects His followers to bear genuine righteousness, the righteousness of God’s Law, and not merely – like the Pharisees and scribes – as an external show of conformity to regulations and rules, but as the outward expression of a heart fully devoted in love to God (Matt. 22.34-30; 5.17-20; 23:25, 26).

This is not something we can achieve in our own strength. Nor is the righteousness that we express, to whatever extent we are able to bear such fruit, our own righteousness. Rather, it is the evidence and fruit of the indwelling Christ, Who, by His Word and Spirit, brings life and renewal in and through us to refresh all those around us (Jn. 6.63; 7.37-39).

Righteousness defines the *character* of the Kingdom of God (Rom. 14.17, 18). We must strive for this righteousness (Matt. 6.33). This life of righteousness is the way to fullness of joy in the Kingdom of God (Jn. 15.6-11), but we cannot attain it to any degree without abiding in Jesus and His Word and Spirit. Without Him, we can do nothing (Jn. 15.1-5).

Love. Chief among the virtues of righteousness, and defining all the others, is love. Jesus calls us to love our fellow citizens in the Kingdom as He has loved us, and to love our neighbors – whoever they may be – as we love ourselves (Jn. 13.1-15; Matt. 22.34-30). Jesus insisted that the Law and the Prophets are sufficient to instruct us in the ways of love, and He promised that whoever learned, kept, and taught these would be great in the Kingdom of heaven (Matt. 22.34-30; 5.17-19).

Fruit borne without

The fruit we bear without through the righteousness and love of Christ is also of two sorts – disciples of the Lord and the reconciling of the world to God.

Disciple-making. Jesus has instructed all His Kingdom citizens to devote themselves to the work of making disciples as they are going about the everyday activities of their lives (Matt. 28.18-20). We are called, that is, to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom and to teach, encourage, and assist our fellow Kingdom citizens in growing to maturity in that glorious realm. Whatever else we do as expressions of love for God and neighbor must be expressed within this disciple-making cast.

Part of our disciple-making priority requires that we become seekers of those who are lost (Lk. 19.10). We cannot simply wait around for lost people to ask us what we believe. Like Jesus, we must go to them, get to know them, look for ways to serve them, and, as we are able, engage them in conversations concerning the Lord Jesus Christ and His Kingdom.

Reconciling. Jesus understood that He was sent to earth, to bring the Kingdom of God near to men, because of His Father's undying love for all the vast cosmos (Jn. 3.16). He also knew that God was at work in Him, to accomplish through His work of redemption the reconciling to God of all His creation (2 Cor. 5.17-19). Whatever our particular involvement in creation may entail – work, cultural activities, involvement with the environment, politics – we must take a Kingdom perspective on it, so that we may pursue the vision of all these aspects of the creation reconciled to God.

As we have seen, in Jesus' mind the Kingdom of God is primary. By bringing it near, and by drawing us into it, He calls us to embrace its priorities and to bring every aspect of our lives into joyous and fulfilling line with the purposes and course of the divine economy, as that is unfolding within the Kingdom of God.

For reflection or discussion

1. What are the different kinds of "fruit" Jesus intends for us to bear?
2. What's involved in cultivating each of these fruit?
3. Do you agree that every believer is called to the work of making disciples? What are the implications of your answer for you?
4. "Whatever our particular involvement in creation may entail – work, cultural activities, involvement with the environment, politics – we must take a Kingdom perspective on it, so that we may pursue the vision of all these aspects of the creation reconciled to God." What does T. M. mean by this?
5. What would you expect to see in a community where the believers were actually bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God?

Next steps: How would you describe the state of Kingdom fruitfulness in your life at this time? Where would you like to see improvement? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.

Prayer:

4 Jesus: The Progress of the Kingdom

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it has grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.” Matthew 13.31, 32

Inevitable growth

The parables and teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ concerning the Kingdom of God reveal just how important this new reality was to His mission. As we have seen, the Kingdom of God *held the primacy* in Jesus message. It was the defining motif and the overarching objective in all His work and teaching.

Jesus, moreover, insisted on the *proximity* of the Kingdom, that it had come and was being “brought near” by Him and His mission, and would come in an even fuller and more significant way within the lifetimes of those who heard Him.

Given the primacy and priority of the Kingdom, it is to be expected that Jesus would enlarge on the *priorities* of that heavenly domain which He had now brought into the sphere of human history. Those priorities – knowing the Lord and bearing lasting fruit – would be identifying marks of all who followed Jesus in seeking, proclaiming, and serving in the Kingdom of God.

As the patriarchs and prophets also saw

A final element of our Lord’s vision of the Kingdom involves His unmistakable sense that the Kingdom of God would *grow and make progress upon the earth*, by the means and according to the characteristics He exemplified and taught throughout His earthly ministry.

This is completely in line with what we have seen hinted at and promised about the Kingdom from the very beginning (cf. Gen. 1.26-28; Dan. 2.44, 45; Is. 9.6, 7). We cannot read the gospel accounts of Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom and not see that, in His mind, the Kingdom He had brought near, by His saving work and Gospel proclamation, would, wherever it took root, make progress and grow to bring forth the fruit evidenced in His own life and insisted on in His teaching.

We may observe this insistence on the progress of the Kingdom in four ways, after which we will summarize two implications that arise from Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom of God. We’ll look at the first two of these ways in this installment.

Parables and miracles of growth

Many of the parables Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God have to do with the idea of growth, as, for example, the parable of the mustard seed.

The Kingdom is “sown” into the earth – symbolic of the preaching of the Word – and, wherever it finds welcoming soil, it takes root and begins to grow. As it grows it becomes visible, prominent, fruit-bearing, and beneficial to all who participate in its fruit.

The parables in Matthew 13 are typical of this emphasis (we’ll hold off on the parable of the wheat and tares for the moment). In the parable of the sower, good seed grows in good soil and bears fruit for those for whom it is intended (vv. 1-8, 18-23).

The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven equally emphasize the growing and expanding character of the Kingdom (vv. 31-33). The parable of the fish net (vv. 47-50) is interesting in that it demonstrates that not all those who are gathered into the “net” of the Kingdom are actually among those for whom the Kingdom is intended. Many, it seems, will enjoy the benefits introduced by the Kingdom of God, and perhaps even consider themselves full-fledged citizens therein, only to be disqualified in the end because they neither know the Lord nor bear the fruit which such knowledge produces (cf. Matt. 7.21-23).

Such parables, accompanied by miracles emphasizing astonishing multiplications (feeding the thousands, water into wine, sudden large catches of fish) impress us not only with Jesus’ sense of the inevitability of the progress of His Kingdom, but of His determination and ability to bring that progress to pass. This is a vision of the Kingdom which, as we have seen comports well with what previous Kingdom visionaries also anticipated.

Called to bear fruit

It is inconceivable that Jesus would have commanded His disciples to bear fruit in the ways we previously noted unless He actually intended them to do so, and expected them to strive for such fruit. Fruit expresses increase, and fruit that remains holds the promise of more fruit yet to come.

Jesus envisioned His rule growing in and through His followers unto love for God and men, righteousness, the multiplication of disciples, and the reconciliation of all things to God through Him. This expectation of and command for fruitfulness marked out specific parameters of Kingdom progress for the followers of Christ, both as individuals and as communities, and is a second evidence that Jesus’ vision of the Kingdom was one of progress and development.

For reflection or discussion

1. Meditate on Daniel 2.44, 45 and Isaiah 9.6, 7. How can you see that these passages must have been in Jesus’ mind as He taught about the Kingdom of God?
2. Jesus expected His Kingdom to expand and increase *in time*. Can you see any evidence from the past 2,000 years that this has actually occurred? How should this evidence affect our thinking about the Kingdom today?
3. Jesus expected the Kingdom to expand and increase *in fruit*. How do you expect to see this increase in your own life?
4. What are some ways your church is planning and working for Kingdom increase like this? What evidence do you see that your plans and work are bearing such fruit?
5. “Jesus envisioned His rule growing in and through His followers unto love for God and men, righteousness, the multiplication of disciples, and the reconciliation of all things to God through Him.” Is this your expectation as well?

Next steps: How does your church equip its members to seek the increase of the Kingdom of God? Talk with a pastor about this question.

Prayer:

5 Jesus: Kingdom Struggle

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it has grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.” Matthew 13.31, 32

Resistance and persecution

We’re looking at the evidence from Jesus’ teaching that He expected the Kingdom of God to expand and increase on earth as it is in heaven. Temporal expansion and increasing fruitfulness are both in the mind of Christ as He unfolds His Kingdom.

Such increase does not come easily, however. Jesus taught His followers that they should expect to be opposed, even to the point of persecution, by advocates of the prevailing worldviews (cf. Jn. 15.18-25). These words do not appear to have been intended only for His immediate circle of disciples, any more than was His prayer in John 17 (cf. v. 20). The first Christians were persecuted in conjunction with the growth and spread of the Christian faith, as it challenged the religious, political, social, and cultural worldviews of the day. If the Gospel had not spread, and if it had not promoted a way of life which challenged the existing worldviews, the Christians would have been left to their religion, just like all the other cults and sects of the day.

But it was the expansive nature of the Gospel, coupled with the radical claims of the Kingdom and the dramatic evidence of the power of the Spirit, that provoked advocates of the settled worldviews to persecute the Church, as they have done in every age. Men will not sit quietly by while their familiar way of life is being turned upside-down (Acts 17.1-9), unless, of course, they have been subdued by a love which they cannot ignore and transformed by a power they cannot resist.

Jesus knew His followers would be persecuted in every age because He foresaw the continuing enlargement and advance of His Kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven, as a powerful presence challenging and overthrowing every pretense of men (cf. Dan. 2.44, 45).

The parable of the wheat and the tares

The parable of the wheat and the tares is perhaps the most paradigmatic of Jesus’ parables concerning the Kingdom of God (Matt. 13.24-30, 36-43). In this parable Jesus envisioned the impact of the Kingdom through all of time, from the first sowing of the Gospel to the final harvest of the saints. He spoke in terms of the whole world, and envisioned it as a field throughout which the Gospel is sown and the Kingdom brings forth fruit over all the earth. He understood there would be opposition – symbolized by the tares – but, in the end, when the angels return to harvest the field, the world will be, as Jesus saw it, a wheat field, ready to be harvested, and not a weed field, waiting to be burned.

Jesus brought a new era, a new realm and power, into the affairs of men and nation. And He was persuaded that nothing, not even the gates of hell, would be able to prevent the progress and growth of this new Kingdom which His coming heralded and brought near (Matt. 16.18).

Implications

Two implications attend to this aspect of Jesus vision. We may state these succinctly.

First, Jesus did not envision His Kingdom coming in its full and complete form prior to His own return in glory. While the Kingdom will make progress, as His followers evangelize the world, increase in Him, and build the Church, the full realization of that promised realm awaits the consummation of history, the day of judgment, and the new heavens and new earth.

So we must not be overly confident concerning how much real progress we may expect to achieve in this life.

At the same time, the followers of Christ must always strive to live up to His vision of progress along the various fronts we have considered, even in the face of stiff resistance. We must continue to call people to repentance and faith, to urge them to press their way into the Kingdom, and promote growth in the righteousness and love of the Kingdom, regardless of how our adversaries may seek to discourage, disparage, and destroy us.

Second, the *progress* of the Kingdom reinforces the *priority* of the Kingdom and makes *seeking the Kingdom and its righteousness* all that much more important as the commanding perspective of the life of faith (Matt. 6.33). When we understand, as Jesus taught, that Kingdom increase is inevitable and irresistible, we will devote ourselves all the more earnestly to seeking that increase in every area and aspect of our lives.

Jesus did not come to bring a faith with merely personal and subjective applications. He came to bring near a Kingdom, a Kingdom that is filling and transforming the nations of the world, and He calls us to seek that Kingdom, as a mighty struggle, in the full expectation that progress can be achieved, even if complete victory must wait.

For reflection or discussion

1. A third evidence that the Kingdom is expanding is the resistance it receives from those who hold to other worldviews. Are we seeing any of this in our own day? Where? In what forms?
2. The fourth evidence of Kingdom growth relates to how Jesus saw the Kingdom at the end of the world. He was confident that the Kingdom would come in its full glory at that time. What should we expect when the Kingdom comes with finality?
3. The world, Jesus taught, is a wheat field waiting to be harvested, not a weed field waiting to be burned. Do you agree? Explain.
4. Explain the relationship between our *vision* of the Kingdom, the *priority* it has in our lives, and the *progress* of the Kingdom we may expect to realize in this life.
5. In what ways are you being encouraged and led to seek the Kingdom of God with greater consistency and fervor?

Next steps: How do you expect your life in the week to come to work for the progress of the Kingdom in the ways we have been discussing? What are your plans? What are you praying for Christ to do in your and through you? Unless we seek the Kingdom in concrete terms, in the everyday situations of our lives, we will not be seeking it at all. Share your thoughts with a Christian friend.

Prayer:

6 The Apostles: The Kingdom Above

...to [the Apostles] He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. Acts 1.3

The Kingdom “on the ground”

With the Apostles the Kingdom of God becomes something more than merely a vision; it is a lived reality which they sought and for the expansion of which they labored through all their days. It is an eternal, heavenly realm that is very much “on the ground” and on the move by the Spirit and Word of God working in and through His redeemed people.

As we might suppose, the Apostles sustained a clear vision of the Kingdom, one that brought forward all the previous teaching of Scripture into the framework of the Gospel and the Person and work of Jesus Christ. For the Apostles the Kingdom of God was intimately bound up with Jesus and the work He presently is doing, both at the Father’s right hand and by His Spirit in and through the Church. And it is a realm of righteousness, peace, and joy, embodied in the Church, the Body of Christ, which advances toward the day of Christ’s imminent return in glory.

Jesus Himself instilled this vision into His Apostles, as we see in Acts 1.3. Having spent over three years teaching, proclaiming, and embodying the coming reality of the Kingdom, and promising His disciples they would see it and rule in it during their lifetimes, He now added a “graduate seminar” in Kingdom review and enlargement, lest they should lose sight of what He had taught them concerning what must be their highest priority in life (Matt. 6.33).

The reality of the Kingdom

The reality of the Kingdom broke into history, and into the lives and ministries of the Apostles, on the first Pentecost.

With the coming of the Spirit, the reality of Jesus’ ascension and rule, and the certainty of everything He had taught and promised, became for the Apostles the new framework for human experience. Everything the Apostles taught and did from that moment forward was with a view to seeking and realizing the rule of Jesus Christ increasingly on earth, as it is in heaven, and in preparing for the full and final attaining of His Kingdom upon His return.

The Apostles’ vision of the Kingdom of God revolved around three foci: above, beyond, and within. Let’s look briefly at each of these, beginning, in this installment, with the first.

The Kingdom above

In the first sermon of the Christian era Peter declared the rule of Jesus as King and Lord to be the orienting fact of the new epoch (Acts 2.33-36):

“Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this that you yourselves see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, The LORD said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand,

Till I make your enemies your footstool.’

Therefore let all the house of Israel assuredly know that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

A new order had been established, a new power was unleashed among men and nations, a new agenda was beginning to unfold, a new King was on the throne, and God was now calling all men everywhere to repent and believe the Gospel.

Paul also understood the central significance of the Kingdom above, where Christ rules at the right hand of God (cf. 1 Cor. 15.25-27). Only in the light of that reality, and against the backdrop of where that reality is leading, can we do works which will last and conduct ministries that will not be in vain, but will have power to actualize in human history the unseen reality of the rule of King Jesus (1 Cor. 15.58).

In the book of Revelation the Apostle John was shown a series of overlapping, integrated visions of the powerful effects of the Kingdom above on all the affairs of men and history. Whatever transpires on earth is the result of things ordained in heaven and carried out by God’s faithful angelic and human servants. The Apostles understood that the rule of Jesus Christ is *the* determinative fact of human history. We cannot understand our lives, our faith, or our reason for being apart from a proper orientation “under the heavens” to the throne of Jesus Christ and the eternal covenantal and Kingdom purposes of God.

We have been seated there with Christ, Paul insists, so that we might live from this vantage point and fulfill our callings as ambassadors of Jesus Christ to a world in which the darkness is receding and the new light of the Kingdom of God is advancing day by day (Eph. 2.6, 7; 1 Jn. 2.8).

For reflection or discussion

1. What do we mean by saying that the Apostles understood the Kingdom of God as a reality “on the ground?”
2. Why is it important that we should cultivate the vision of the Kingdom that Peter, Paul, and John held – that it is a Kingdom *from above*? How should we nurture that vision?
3. “A new order had been established, a new power was unleashed among men and nations, a new agenda was beginning to unfold, a new King was on the throne, and God was now calling all men everywhere to repent and believe the Gospel.” In view of this, what is our responsibility as Kingdom citizens and ambassadors?
4. Would you describe the Kingdom of God as an “above” reality in your own walk with and work for the Lord? Would you describe it as an “on the ground” reality? Explain.
5. “We cannot understand our lives, our faith, or our reason for being apart from a proper orientation ‘under the heavens’ to the throne of Jesus Christ and the eternal covenantal and Kingdom purposes of God.” Do you agree? What are the implications of such an idea?

Next steps: How much does the Kingdom “above” factor in your daily walk with and work for the Lord? Talk with a Christian friend about this question.

Prayer:

7 The Apostles: The Kingdom Beyond and Within

And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. Ephesians 1.22, 23

From beyond

For the Apostles, the Kingdom was centered “above,” where Christ is seated in the heavenly places in glory. But it also exists *beyond* our present and *within* us at the same time.

The “beyondness” of the Kingdom of God consists of two aspects, according to the Apostles.

First is the fact that the Kingdom is unfolding from within a spiritual realm which lies beyond the reach of our physical senses. If we would understand the protocols and promise of the Kingdom and draw on its resources and power for daily living, we must learn to “see” the rule of King Jesus with the eyes of the heart, by faith, and not by sight (Eph. 1.15-23).

Thus we search the Scriptures in order to gather and assemble the many images and teachings about the unseen realm and how we must “view” it. We seek the Kingdom of God as we set our minds on these things and prosecute all our daily affairs and activities with a view to serving as ambassadors of the risen Christ (Col. 3.1-3; 2 Cor. 5.17-21). We do not see Jesus now, at least, not with the eyes of the flesh; nevertheless, we love and adore Him because we “see” Him by faith, as He reveals Himself to us in His Word, and we conduct our affairs from within the framework of what we thus see and know to be true (1 Pet. 1.8, 9).

We know that we are surrounded by a cloud of faithful witnesses, whose lives we emulate and hope we share, and thus we desire to be like them faithful servants in the Kingdom which they anticipated, and which we now have entered as sons and daughters and heirs (Heb. 12.1, 2; Lk. 12.41-48).

Unto beyond

Second, the Kingdom is “beyond” us because it is still to come, both increasing daily on earth, and in its perfection and full glory when Jesus returns to consummate His work of redemption (Rev. 19-22). We understand that this world is not our permanent place of abode and that we are on a journey culminating in a new heavens and new earth (2 Pet. 3.8-14). This being so, we live *toward* the coming of the unseen Kingdom, daily striving, through God’s Word and Spirit, to become transformed into the image of Jesus Christ, Whom, we believe, we shall one day see face to face (2 Cor. 3.12-18; 1 Jn. 3.1-3).

The Kingdom of God exists beyond us – ontologically and temporally – and it is our calling to seek that Kingdom, both as it presently exists in the unseen realm and as it shall come to be increasingly on earth and finally upon the Lord’s return in glory. The “beyondness” of the Kingdom makes of our lives a perpetual seeking to realize the Kingdom in greater fullness.

The Kingdom within

Thus the Apostles understood, as Jesus declared, that the Kingdom of God is within us, and we exist within it. It is a realm of true and transforming spiritual power (1 Cor. 4.20) where Jesus Christ is making new all those who come to Him in faith and follow in His holy and righteous and good way, according to the Law of God (Matt. 5.17-19).

The Kingdom is within us, and, by the Spirit and Word of God, the Kingdom brings forth the fruit of righteousness, peace, and joy, which honors God and brings abundant benefit to men (Rom. 4.17-19). We

expect to see more evidence of the Kingdom in us – the fruit of the Spirit, the tokens of love, the virtues of holiness – and to demonstrate more of the Kingdom’s power by our witness to Christ in the world (Acts 1.8).

Thus the Apostles repeatedly urge and remind us, acknowledging that such a way of living is a struggle against spiritual forces determined to destroy us (2 Pet. 3.1-7; Eph. 6.10-20) and wicked men who seek only their own interests rather the glory of God (Rom. 1.18-32; 1 Pet. 4.1-19; 2 Tim. 3.1-13).

Living within the Kingdom, we are called to grow as disciples, becoming equipped for the work of ministry so that we might help to grow our churches in unity and maturity unto the Lord (Eph. 4.11-16). The Church, which the Apostles labored to found and build, is the outpost and agent of the Kingdom of God, and it is important that she strive always to heed the Word of her King and to be faithful in all her Kingdom duties until He returns (Rev. 2, 3).

The Apostles do not speak as frequently about the Kingdom as Jesus did, or even as much of the Old Testament does. This is because they assumed all that prior teaching and vision and were experiencing the reality of it through their lives and ministries. What patriarchs and prophets only foresaw, and what Jesus anticipated and proclaimed, the Apostles – and we as their spiritual offspring – now realize day by day as we meditate on, seek, and live in the power of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, which is coming on earth as it is in heaven.

For reflection or discussion

1. In what sense or senses is the Kingdom of God “beyond” us? What are the implications of this “beyondness” for our everyday lives?
2. How can someone know that the Kingdom of God is “within” him?
3. How can believers encourage one another in seeking and pressing into the Kingdom of God?
4. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study?
5. How are you planning to put that lesson to work in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Next steps: How would you describe your vision of the Kingdom of God at this time? In what ways is this vision affecting your daily walk with and work for the Lord? Share your thoughts with a church leader.

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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