

## CHAPTER 3: THE KINGDOM OF GOD: GOAL OF MISSIONIC MISSION

### John Driver P. 83-103

John Driver, "The Kingdom of God: Goal of Messianic Mission," *The Transfiguration of Mission*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 1993),

The kingdom of God is a primary image for understanding the biblical vision of God's salvific activity, first of all in the vocation of Israel and then in the saving mission of his Messiah. While the term *Kingdom* is found in all parts of the New Testament, it plays a dominant role in the synoptic Gospels (Shenk p.85).

The exercise of God's kingly rule was not a vague abstraction in ancient Israel. God's kingship does not merely mean a general insistence on moral values as such. God's reign has to do with the concrete forms which life takes among his people. It is in the relationships among God's people that his righteous rule is manifest. The Kingdom of God is not abstractly defined in the Old Testament as "wherever God reigns." God's kingdom is manifested in the concrete forms in which social relationships are practiced in response to his intention for his people, in particular, and for all of his creation in general (Shenk p. 86).

Psalms 145 and 146 reflect this view of the kingdom expressed in concrete relationship of covenant righteousness. Here the elements of God's reign include bringing justice to the oppressed, providing food for the hungry, setting prisoners free, opening the eyes of the blind, lifting up the bowed, watching over the sojourners, sustaining the widows and orphans (Shenk p. 87).

The Decalogue is the most concise and clearest description of God's intention for human relationships under his rule. .. The second table of the Decalogue contains specific descriptions of the forms which Israel's response to Yahweh's gracious kingship will take. Covenant Law was not a mutually beneficial legal contract but was based exclusively on Yahweh's saving act of grace, liberation from Egypt. Life under Yahweh's kingship takes the concrete social, economic, and political forms sketched out, in principal, in the Decalogue (Shenk p. 88).

The sabbatical and jubilee provisions offer another example of the concrete forms which social relationships take under God's rule (Lev. 25; Duet. 15:)

#### The land Slaves

Throughout its history of monarchy, Israel's rulers failed miserably in their understanding of the nature and demands of God's rule. The prophets continually called them to "seek justice," correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widows (Is. 1:17). Contrary to the thinking of many Christians throughout the church's history, the prophets did not perceive of God's rule as a purely spiritual and future reality (Shenk p. 88).

God's kingdom embraced concrete political and social events; **Mic. 4:1-4**; They foresaw a submission to God's rule which would bring about the cessation of warfare as a solution to differences. This would mean the conversion of weapons into instruments for the production of food (4:3). The fear and deprecation, so common under evil rulers, would be superseded under God's righteous rule (4:4) (Shenk p. 88).

The **kingdom vision** shared by the **prophets** was primarily historical. In all probability they were not thinking of a fulfillment beyond history as we know it. But this does not mean that they envisioned the kingdom coming as a result of mere cause and effect in human history. It would be the result of the sovereign activity of God who had saved his people in the past and whose coming anew was continually awaited (Shenk p.88).

God's rule is characterized by the wholeness of life as he has always intended it to be, in marked contrast to the social injustice and suffering, of which Egypt was a paradigm in Israel's experience (Shenk p. 89).

The great prophets of Israel expected that the messianic age would be characterized by God's sovereignty over his people in a new order of salvation with personal, social, spiritual and material dimensions (Shenk p.89).

An authentic salvation of covenant love, justice, and peace would become reality because God would dwell in the midst of his people, shepherding them as all good kings should (Shenk p. 89).

The political aspiration of the Sadducees, the revolutionary impatience of the Zealots, and the social withdrawal of the Essenes. This is the broad background of against which we must understand the New Testament announcement of the good news of the Kingdom of God on the part of John the Baptist, Jesus, the messianic community in the synoptic Gospels (Shenk p. 90).

## **JESUS AND THE KINGDOM**

The Jewish people in general expected that the Messiah would establish God's kingdom, vindicating the righteous (the Jewish political and religious establishment) and destroying Israel's enemies (Shenk p.90).

It soon became clear that Jesus' perception of the kingdom differed from the popular views. He began his ministry making it clear that God's kingdom is for all peoples. In the synagogue in Nazareth Jesus read the prophetic vision of messianic fulfillment from Isaiah 61:1-2a. And then, instead of announcing divine judgment on Israel's enemies, Jesus went on to recall God's gracious dealings in the past with foreigners including the widow from Sidon and Naaman the Syrian. Jewish opposition was so violent that they almost killed Jesus. Scholars have suggested that Luke 4:18 may well have been intended as a brief preview of Jesus' messianic mission (Shenk p. 90).

Two more ways in which Jesus' perception of the kingdom differed from popular understandings are reflected in his response to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). This text has often been interpreted to mean that the kingdom has nothing to do with social structures. This interpretation is probably more attractive to modern readers than it would have

been Jesus' contemporaries who generally viewed God's rule as a concrete social reality – if not present, then at least future (Shenk p.90).

First, Jesus' response to Pilate is perceived as a reference to the world to come, in contrast to this world. This view understands the kingdom of God as a reality to be experienced in the distant future, beyond the scope of history. This strongly futuristic view of the kingdom has appealed to many in the church, especially since the fourth century. However, it seems to contradict the plain sense of the worlds of Jesus recorded by both Matthew and Luke: "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28; cf. Luke 11:20). The sense of the verb here leaves no doubt that Jesus viewed the kingdom a present reality. Thayer has suggested the following translation: "The kingdom of God has come upon you sooner than you expected" (Shenk p. 91).

Second, the kingdom is often perceived as an inner, spiritual reality, the right relationship of an individual with God. Jesus' words in Luke 17:21 are interpreted, "the kingdom of God is within you," as referring primarily to an inner, personal experience. It would seem to be more in line with the intent of Jesus here to interpret Luke's text, "The kingdom of God is among you," or "in your midst ((Shenk p. 91).

From the context of John 18:36 the meaning of Jesus' words becomes clear. His kingship is not of this world, in that he does not resort to coercive violence, either for self-protection or for the establishment of the kingdom. So God's rule does affect the political, social, and economic decisions of his people who hold values which offer a radical alternative to those of the world, rather than withdrawing into the inner spiritual nature of the person or projecting into a future beyond history. God's rule calls for life in his community as he has always intended it to be (Shenk p. 91)

The collection of Jesus' teaching into the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel would seem to show that the early community understood Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom in the light of the Sinatic Covenant: Yahweh's act of liberation and the Decalogue which ordered social relationship under his sovereign reign. In Matthew's Gospel, the description of Jesus' salvific ministry and the giving of the Sermon on the Mount offer a remarkable parallel to the Sinai experience. In effect, life under God's kingship takes the concrete social, economic, and political forms sketched out in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus did not abolish the covenant righteousness reflected in the Decalogue and the sabbatical provisions which characterize Yahweh's kingship. Rather, he radicalized it, discerning its deepest meaning by going to its very root in God's intention (Matt. 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43) (Shenk p.91).

In effect, the mission of Jesus has been to reverse the consequence of evil in the world: disease, demon possession; the hostility of nature; social, religious, and ethnic rivalries; hunger; economic exploitation; empty religiosity; alienation; and death. The conflict which characterized Jesus' ministry was, in reality, the struggle of the new order to displace the era of sin and death. Therefore, all who trust in wealth, power, and prestige for security react violently because the value of the new order threaten the false source of security (Shenk p.93).

Luke saw the proclamation of the kingdom of God as the core of the early church's message. Paul mentions the kingdom of God in Romans 14:17 in the context of a discussion about problems arising out of Jewish ritualistic practices in the Christian community. Based on the life and teachings of Jesus (Matt. 5:-6:), Paul was convinced that the coming of the kingdom of God has cancelled out an earlier era concerned about details of ritual purity. I Cor. 15:24-28. Ps. 110: Rom. 8:18; Col. 2:15; Gal. 3:28 – New community; Eph . 2:13-18; Col. 3: 10-11; (Shenk p. 94).

## KINGDOM, CHURCH, AND MISSION

Even Jesus' disciples shared the popular nationalistic expectations right up to Pentecost (Matt. 20:21; Acts 1:6). It was well nigh impossible for Jews to conceive of the restoration of Israel under God's righteous rule apart from a restoration of political power and economic wellbeing. This was the context in which the eschatological coming of the nations to worship Israel's God was expected (Shenk p.94).

In contrast to this vision, the suffering servant of the prophetic vision of Isaiah became the messianic model. Jesus saw himself as a servant who comes in weakness and humility. Therefore, the kingdom, as Jesus presented it, was a mystery to the masses and religious leaders alike. On the other hand, people from the most unlikely sectors of Jewish society thronged to Jesus. Judaism's outcasts – the tax collectors and prostitutes, the poor and disinherited, Galileans and Samaritans, the humble and the "little ones" – crowded to enter into the kingdom which was rejected by their leaders (Matt. 21:31) (Shenk p. 95).

God's rule of righteousness was so mysteriously different it was rejected out-of-hand by Israel's authorities. Of course, the kingdom which Jesus inaugurated was so radically different it was also soon discarded by major sectors of the Christian church. The concept of the kingdom was redefined to make it compatible with the interests of the powerful and the prosperous. This was done by practically identifying the kingdom with the church, or by conceiving of the kingdom as almost entirely future. The kingdom of God was thus stripped of its power, and its message was no longer good news ((Shenk p. 95).

The meaning of this radically upside-down kingdom (Kraybill, 1978) can be perceived only through the eyes of faith. It is a matter of "hear(ing) the word and understand(ing) it, " i.e., grasping it in obedient faith (Matt. 13:23) (Shenk p.95).

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD: THE PRESENCE OF THE FUTURE

In the mission of Jesus, the future has been brought into our midst. The ministry of Jesus only the beginning of the end. All that he did points to the consummation of all things which he will usher in at his parousia (Shenk p.96).

In its "other worldliness" the church is tempted to flee from the real world – which is the object of God's love – into an unreal and spiritualized sphere. Instead of offering a message of hope for the present, the church tends to limit its offer of hope to the future.

Some have conceived of the Sermon on the Mount as primarily intended for the future. But this is to deprive the church of kingdom blessedness here and now (Shenk p.97).

## THE PRIMACY OF THE KINGDOM

In our attempt to understand the identity and mission of the church we must begin where the New Testament begins – with the kingdom. The primacy of the kingdom of God is stated quite explicitly: “Seek first the kingdom and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33). In other parts of the New Testament, the priority of the kingdom is implied. Jesus begins his messianic mission in the synoptic Gospels with his proclamation of the kingdom (Shenk p. 98).

The kingdom is God’s righteous rule in human history to which people are invited to respond in loyal commitment. God reigns in a radically new order. Those who responded to Jesus’ call were incorporated into a messianic community, a new people of God, the church. Therefore, the church may be understood as the people of the kingdom. The kingdom and the church are closely related: however, they are not identical. The church preaches and teaches the gospel of the kingdom. It continues Jesus’ kingdom actively (Shenk p. 98). The church is to proceed in exactly the same way as Jesus did in its use of the keys of the kingdom. ... The church must never forget its servant role. It is at the service of the King and of his righteous reign. To commit oneself to the kingdom of God will ordinarily involve participation in the community of the King (Shenk p.99).

Jesus warned his followers that “no one can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24). Jesus calls people to renounce their allegiance to the “prince of this world” and to submit to the rule of God. Just in the case of the Messiah himself, faithfulness in the witness of the church will take the form of a cross. ... “he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 10:39b). According to the New Testament, there is no other path to faithfulness in mission (Shenk p. 100).

## GOD’S KINGDOM AND GOD’S MISISON

The church must understand its role in instrumental terms rather than in managerial and imperial images, as has often been the case. The church does not build the kingdom. According to the New Testament use of the image, God is the builder and the church is the building. The church is not the agent or representative of the kingdom. According to the pertinent New Testament images, the church is servant and messenger of the King. (Shenk p. 100).

## CHAPTER 8: MESSIANIC EVANGELIZATION (P. 199) by John Driver

John Driver, "Messianic Evangelization," *The Transfiguration of Mission*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993),

As the church moved farther and farther from its roots in Jesus of Nazareth, the content and the methods of its evangelization have concentrated less on the forming of disciples of Jesus and more on communicating the church's teachings about Jesus. In the process the goal of evangelization has moved from the creation of Jesus' likeness in his followers to the formation of orthodox believers who receive the appropriate sacraments and assent to correct doctrines (Shenk p. 199).

More serious consequence is the tendency to privatize salvation, accompanied by an almost exclusively individualistic evangelistic practice. This has often led to an evangelization largely bereft of the universal scope which characterizes the biblical vision. The ultimate reconciliation of all things to God through the Messiah is the goal toward which authentic evangelization points (Shenk p. 199-200).

### Subversive Evangelization

In the New Testament the saving gospel comes to us from a position of socioeconomic and political weakness, humanly speaking, rather than from a position characterized by human power. In this sense, the saving power of the gospel comes to us from below, rather than from above, as has been generally taken for granted by the church throughout most of its history. The Messianic movement described in the New Testament was a minority movement which originated on the periphery of Judaism (Shenk p. 200).

### GALILEE

The great commission is prefaced by reference to Galilee, "Galilee of Gentiles," located as it was on the geographical, sociological, and religious periphery of Judaism, is clearly identified in the Gospels as the point of departure for God's eschatological initiative of messianic salvation. The Gospels are really quite emphatic about the Galilean provenance of the messianic movement and its evangel (Shenk p. 200).

This is the note on which the evangelization of Israel began. "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee... Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:9a, 14b-15; cf. Matt. 4:12-17; Luke 4:14-21 (Shenk p. 200).

The evangelization of the Gentiles, begun by Peter in the household of the Roman centurion, Cornelius, also took the Galilean origins of the messianic movement as its point of departure ( Acts 10:36-38).

The ultimate insults by the Jewish religious leaders was "Are you from Galilee too?"(John 7:52). That the Messiah could possibly come from Galilee was, for respectable Jews, highly doubtful (John 7:41). And those who insisted that it was impossible for a true prophet to arise out of Galilee claimed scriptural support for their view (7:52) (Shenk p. 201).

The implications of a gospel which mediated from below and by outsiders have rarely been grasped by a church allied, in one way or another, with power (Shenk p. 201).

The Galilean provenance of the messianic movement is not just an isolated element of merely geographic importance in the gospel story. It is a part of a larger picture in which God's saving initiative arises from the bottom side of the social and religious structures and from the periphery of the political sphere. In Luke and John especially we find a seemingly disproportionate emphasis on Samaritans, for example, in spite of a very strong Jewish prejudice to the contrary. The disenfranchised within Israel – the poor, the “little ones,” the prostitutes, the publicans, those afflicted with leprosy, the foreigners – not only appear in the Gospel narratives as special object of God's grace, but they are also active protagonists in God's project of evangelization. These examples all point toward a salvific economy which is subversive. God's kingdom initiative emerges from below (Shenk p. 201).

The New Testament is full of evidence which points to the **lowly beginnings** of the messianic movement. Among the earliest self-designations which the primitive community applied to itself are “the way,” “strangers and sojourners,” “exiles” or “pilgrims,” “the meek,” and the “poor.” These images reflect the early church's understanding of its nature and evangelizing mission. Jesus himself was poor. In earliest childhood he is presented as a political refugee. All of the women named in his genealogy would have been considered social outcasts (Shenk p. 202).

The messianic community understood that Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God ... emptied himself, taking upon himself the form of a servant,” was its model for a “manner of life .. worthy of the gospel of Christ (Phil. 2:6-7; 1:27) (Shenk p. 203).

We can understand better the truly radical character of Jesus' message. There was a profound difference between the approach of Jesus and that of all the other political, social, and religious groups of the period. Sadducees and Pharisees, Zealots, and Essenes all had in common their willingness to accept, in one way or another, the Jewish social system: the monarchy, the temple, the priesthood, and the right of the Jewish people to a place of divine favor among the family of nations. For his part, Jesus rejected all of this (Shenk p. 203).

Jesus was not a reformist. He was radical in that he did not accept the validity of the system. He called for radical change. In this Jesus stood in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. But he went beyond the prophets of the Old Testament. They called for justice in the context of what they seem to have believed to be essentially valid social institutions. Jesus did not simply call for justice on behalf of the oppressed. His was a movement of even more radical renewal. He announced a kingdom characterized by “blessedness” ( Matt. 5:3-10). Under the rule of God humans are offered freedom from the idols of wealth (the desire to possess), prestige (the drive to be somebody), and power (the will to dominate). According to the messianic evangel, there is sharing instead of accumulation, there is compassionate service instead of seizing selfish superiority, and there is love in a context of peoplehood instead of rivalry and violence (Shenk p. 204).

Truly radical critique of the system is possible only when the prophet, in some sense, stands outside of the system. God's Messiah could not arise in Jerusalem. He needed to come from

Galilee, from the periphery and from below, in order truly to evangelize. Jerusalem killed him because his evangel, a fate which he shared with the authentic prophets before him (Shenk p. 204).

### Kingdom of God

God's kingdom embraces concrete political and social events. According to the prophetic vision, warfare are a solution to differences would cease, weapons could be converted into implements for the production of food, and the fear and deprivation, so common under evil rulers, would be superseded under God's righteous rule (Mic. 4:1-4) (Shenk p. 206).

The meaning of conversion is illustrated in John's response to queries about the meaning of repentance (what shall we do?: Luke 3:10-14). The alternative to selfish accumulation of possessions is generous sharing; to the oppressiveness of economic greed, transparent dealings within the covenant community; to violence, the solidarity of genuine compassion (Shenk p.206).

The Gospels are unanimous in their conviction that Jesus' messianic mission is salvific. And when the Gospels indicate that Jesus began his saving mission by announcing the kingdom, they clearly imply that salvation is to be found under the rule of God (Shenk p. 207).

The prophetic vision of God's reign found in Is. 61:1-2 furnishes Jesus with his point of departure for understanding messianic salvation in Luke's Gospel (Luke 4:16-22). Here salvation is understood in terms of the restoration of God's gracious covenant relationship, and concretely, in terms of sabbatical and Jubilee's evangelizing mission (Shenk p. 207).

The "blessings and the "woes" found in the Sermon on the Plain are perfectly comprehensible in light of the Jubilee paradigm (Luke 6:20-26). Those who are poor, hungry, afflicted, and persecuted will find salvation in the new era of messianic salvation. But for the rich, the powerful, the uncompassionate, and the oppressors who are unrepentant the message of messianic restoration spells judgment (Shenk p. 207).

Jesus' compassionate solidarity with the "harassed and the helpless," bereft of the benefits of God's righteous rule, provides a model for the evangelizing mission of his followers (Matt. 9:36-38). For Jesus this meant rejection and persecution at the hands of the Jewish establishment. It is this innocent and vicarious suffering which became the focal point of Jesus' evangelizing mission (Shenk p. 212).

HOPE LIES IN THE CHURCH, BUT THE CHURCH MUST BE TRANSFORMED TO TRANSFORM CULTURE OF OUR DAY.

### WHAT THE CHURCH CAN OR MUST DO BY OTHER SCHOLARS

Dr. John Buchanan, former moderator of Presbyterian Church (USA) writes, "Mission is Why We are Here," and "The Church Exists for the World."

He quotes Theologian Emil Brunner saying.

*"the church exists by mission as fire exists by burning."*



[What one person can do?](#) One person can make a difference, but only if he or she joins with others in forging collective responses to human need. Individualism only deepens human poverty (Schlabach p. 17).

The world can never be freed from the gods and idols of power-nationalism, materialism, militarism, classism, self-centeredness – apart from God's intervention (Shenk p. 31).

Read my paper on Church and Society