

TRANSFORMATION: THE KINGDOM MODEL

STUDY 12: PRIORITIES IN MISSION

The Centrality of the Kingdom in the Teaching of Jesus

"I must preach the good news of the Kingdom of God, for I was sent for this purpose" (Lk. 4:43).

"And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the Kingdom" (Mt. 9:35).

"It is well known that Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God. According to the Synoptic Gospels, the Kingdom was the major theme of His sermons and parables" (CRESR Report, 1982).

One writer describes the importance of this theme with the words:

The central aspect of the teaching of Jesus was that concerning the Kingdom of God. Of this there can be no doubt and today no scholar does in fact, doubt it. Jesus appeared as one who proclaimed the Kingdom; all else in His message and ministry serves a function in relation to that proclamation and derives its meaning from it.

'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand' (Mt. 4:17)...with these words the first two evangelists sum up the whole message of Jesus. (Bornkamm, 1960, p. 7)

The message of Jesus centers upon the Kingdom of God. Altogether, the three Synoptic Gospels contain approximately 114 references to the Kingdom of God.

The Signs of the Kingdom

At the consultation of the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility in 1982 (CRESR), evangelical scholars suggested seven signs of the presence of the Kingdom. They are:

1. Jesus in the midst of His people.
2. The preaching of the gospel.
3. Exorcism.
4. Miracles of healing and control over nature.
5. The miracle of conversion and new birth.
6. The "fruit of the spirit": in the lives of Christians.
7. Suffering.

These features therefore should be present in programs seeking to extend and demonstrate the presence, reality, and priority of the Kingdom in human communities. In the development program you work in or know, state how much these signs feature in the planning and practice of the organization or project. State your assessments as percentages.

Images of the Kingdom

There are three basic contexts for the stories Jesus told. Some parables are set in the marketplace, others in the countryside, and yet others in the home.

1) Commercial Images

- a) A hidden treasure (Mt. 13).
- b) A valuable pearl (Mt. 13).
- c) A catch of fish (Mt. 13).
- d) A king settling accounts (Mt. 18).
- e) A rich man challenged to share his wealth (Mt. 19; Mk. 10; Lk. 10).
- f) House builders (Mt. 7).
- g) A reward for faithfulness and fruitfulness (Mt. 21).
- h) Managers (Mt. 25; Lk. 19).

2) Agricultural Images

- a) A farmer sowing seeds (Mt. 13; Mk. 4; Lk. 8)
- b) A field of wheat and weeds (Mt. 13; Mk 4)
- c) Mustard seeds and shrubs (Mt. 4; Lk. 13).
- d) Helpless sheep (Mt. 9).
- e) An abundant harvest (Mt. 9).
- f) Tenants of a vineyard (Mt. 21).

3) Family Images.

- a) A housewife preparing bread (Mt. 13, Lk. 13).
- b) A child with implicit faith (Mt. 18, Mk. 9, Lk. 9).
- c) Conflict between service and status (Mt. 20, Mk. 10)
- d) Offering a cup of water to the helpless (Mt. 10, 25; Mk. 9).
- e) A marriage feast (Mt. 22; Lk. 14).
- f) Guests at a wedding (Mt. 25; Mk. 13; Lk. 12;).
- g) Providing food, shelter, and clothing (Mt. 25; Lk. 12).

Choose one image from each group and, beginning with the words, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." write a parable in your own words. Repeat the exercise with another image not in the above list.

Another analysis of the parables notes that there are 61 in total, highlighting 34 persons (the Good Samaritan etc.), 156 things (four soils etc.), seven plants (mustard seeds etc.) and four animals (lost sheep etc.).

Stories as a Medium for Conveying Truth

Having recognized the centrality of the idea of the Kingdom in the teaching of Jesus and the range of image He used to describe the Kingdom, this study now looks briefly at the form in which this teaching was given.

The characteristic beginning for Jesus' instructions about the Kingdom was, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..." This was the literary form for a parable. Today the term "illustration" or simply "story" would be used to describe the same thing. Jesus was a master story teller. He

chose stories rather than allegories, legal prescriptions, poems, or philosophical argument to convey the most important spiritual truths about Gods' will for the world and its people.

The most important point is not just that He chose stories but that these stories were filled with objects, places, and events which the people could easily understand. Everyone knew about weddings and wheat, sheep and stewardship, catching fish and building houses. These things appeared constantly in their own stories and many appeared in the traditions of the Old Testament.

A bridge of understanding with any people group can be built when the gospel is illustrated with images used in their stories of their past experiences. For example, to the people of Papua New Guinea who practiced child sacrifice to settle disputes, Jesus was presented and accepted as the "peace child." The gospel, then, came as good news!

In Bangalore the collapse of a multistory building provided a powerful illustration of greed, faulty planning, and poor workmanship. Suggest other elements in the gospel which might link with the stories of other ethnic groups.

Values of the Kingdom

In the Beatitudes Jesus calls blessed those who would normally be considered unfortunate, powerless, and under the judgment of God. They include the poor, those who suffer death in their families, the meek, those who desire justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who suffer persecution for their beliefs. These people are blessed because their circumstances of life help them to know and come to God.

In Matthew chapter 5 this passage is followed by the woes – on the rich and hypocritical and later on the Pharisees, whose legalism blinded them to the spirit of the law they professed to be experts on, and to the love of God for all who suffered. Riches, hypocrisy, and legalism are barriers to recognizing and belonging to the Kingdom.

How can churches and Christian development organizations promote Kingdom values and combat worldly values? Would Christians be ore successful if they remained as disciple teams or house churches? What is the optimum size of an organization or community to express servanthood?

Kingdom Priorities

Jesus stressed that the Kingdom itself should be the top priority in life. 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you" (Mt. 6:33)

The investor sells all to buy the great pearl and the treasure-bearing field. The shepherd leaves all to find the lost sheep; the father gives all to celebrate the lost son's return; and the housewife searches everywhere to find the misplaced coin. The Kingdom is a treasure and discovery without equal. The first Kingdom priority is the Kingdom itself.

The second priority of the Kingdom is service for others. The rebuke to the disciples when they sat in the important seats and sought privileges in the Kingdom makes this point. The

challenge is to offer whatever one has, even if it is only a little – a single coin, a cup of water – and Jesus' final parable which linked such actions with membership of the Kingdom and entry into heaven reinforces this priority.

Teaching about the Kingdom and service for the King are two sides of one coin in the gospel record. Jesus went about preaching and teaching and healing all kinds of diseases. True Kingdom development combines proclamation and service. Estimate the extent to which this is true of your project or a development program you know.

On the "kingdom graph" (Figure 12.1) mark where your project fits. Interpret your results. A score on the rising diagonal indicates a balanced program. A high number suggest success, a low number suggest failure.

Characteristics of the Kingdom

In Signs of the Kingdom Lesslie Newbigin describes characteristics of the Kingdom not always stressed by evangelicals. He believes that Jesus taught that the three main characteristics of the Kingdom are:

1. It is universal. It embraces everything. It brings liberation to such infrastructural dimensions as sickness, poverty, and death. It restructures interpersonal relationships characterized by the absence of hatred and a plenitude of fellowship. There is a new relationship with god, who is the Father of all His beloved children. The Kingdom of God cannot be reduced to any dimension of this world, not even a religious dimension' Jesus regards as diabolical any temptation to reduce the Kingdom to some particular segment of reality, whether political, religious, or miraculous (Mt. 4:1-11)
2. It is structural. It not only embraces everything but it also signifies a total revolution of structures. It does not merely modify the outlines of reality but goes to the roots and brings total freedom.
3. It is definitive. Because it has a universal and structural nature, it implies the end of the world. The Kingdom defines God's ultimate and final will. This world in which we live and suffer is coming to an end; there will be a new heaven and a new earth where justice, peace, and concord among all God's sons and daughters will finally triumph in the Father's great house. We can understand Jesus' exclamation: "Happy the eyes that see what you are seeing!" (Lk. 10:23)

A feature of the Kingdom parables, especially the agricultural images, is that they emphasis growth. The Kingdom is a living, growing, dynamic reality, or should be, because it is the Kingdom of a living God. Kingdom values should be spreading wherever the King's ambassadors are located.

Another feature is the invitational aspect. The Kingdom attracts participants and participation. People are encouraged, persuaded, and compelled to enter and many, mostly the poor, do.

The final key feature is the judgmental aspect. The existence of the Kingdom brings a division of belonging or not belonging. The Bible states that the judgment of not belonging is

final and catastrophic. The goal for the King's servants is to ensure that everyone belongs and that their every action is consistent with the ethics of the Kingdom.

Kingdom Leadership

1) The Rightful Leader. Obviously the king is the leader of a kingdom. Acknowledging the lordship of Christ was central in the early Christian creeds. Under persecution from earthly, political, and religious leaders, they proclaimed "Jesus is Lord" and often paid the consequences. The hymn in Philippians chapter 21 which starts by speaking of the humility of Jesus ends with the triumphant statement,

"Therefore God has highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven, on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of god the Father."

An acknowledgment of the lordship of Christ must be included in every program and project which would seek to be a sign of the future God intends. Knees bowed now and tongues confessing now are the authentic signs of the reality of the Kingdom in our midst.

2) Jesus' New Model. Jesus modeled a new style of kingly leadership. He constantly chastised the Pharisees for making and interpreting laws in ways which bound the human spirit. He sought to liberate people to become what God had made them. To do this He didn't promulgate laws or rule from a palace. HE mixed with the people "preaching good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind. He healed the broken hearted and set the oppressed free. He announced the Kingdom had come" (Lk. 4). Kingdom leadership is not demonstrated by large offices or large numbers of staff. It is demonstrated by being out among the people, meeting them where they are, hearing their concerns and helping them meet their needs with the resources at hand, especially the power of god, released through faith and prayer.

3) Servant Leadership. Jesus challenged His disciples "Don't be like the Pharisees who love to show their importance by their fine robes and pious prayers...". "Whoever wants to be great among you must become servant of all" "And He took a towel, wrapped it round himself, and washed the disciples feet." Jesus Himself was the greatest example of selfless service.

A creed for development workers is,
Go to the people, Live among them
Learn from them, Love them
Start with what they know
Build with what they have
And of the best leaders
When the task is accomplished
The people will all remark
'We have done this ourselves.'

Though not intended to be a necessarily Christian statement, these words express well a part of the Kingdom philosophy. The three characteristics of Kingdom leaderships are 1) acknowledging the King, 2) going to the people, and 3) serving the poor.

Discuss how your project expresses and encourages this type of leadership.

Modern Parables

The goals of the Kingdom can still be well expressed in parables. Below is an example written by Huub Oosterhuis in the book The Children of the Poor Man. After reading this parable attempt to write a similar brief story.

There was once a man who had two sons and when he died each received half his land. The one son was rich, but he had no children, the other the other had seven sons and was poor. That night the rich son could not sleep. My father has made a mistake, he thought, for I am rich, and my brother is poor; his land is not enough for so many sons. And he got up went out before daybreak in order to move the fence.

The poor son, too, lay awake that night. My father has made a mistake, he thought, for I have my seven sons but my brother is lonely – and he got up and went out in order to move the fence before daybreak. When the day broke, they met one another. I tell you, in that very place the city of peace will arise.

What is Oosterhuis saying in this parable? To where were the brothers planning to move the fence?

Five Perspectives on the Poor

To begin ministering incarnationally to the poor, the negative images most non-poor people have of the poor, must first be dealt with. They are typically viewed in five ways (Figure 12.2). Each has implications and associated solutions.

1. Mirror Analogy

Cause: A lower standard of living is a superficial difference between people. Rich and poor are basically the same. This denies the seriousness of poverty.

Cure: Provide some opportunities for improvement but no radical change is needed.

2. Pollution Analogy

Cause: The poor are healthier than the rich who are polluted by materialism. Idealizes native peoples and cultures.

Cure: The poor are the hope for a revitalization of western society. Identification with and mobilization of the poor to bring in the new society.

3. Natural Analogy

Cause: The poor are biologically inferior or simply different in nature and social structure.

Cure: Coexistence, separate development, or block aid for the poor to use in their own way.

4. Medical Analogy

Cause: Sickness exists in the social, physical, and mental spheres, resulting in stunted outlooks and opportunities.

Cure: Education, training, and community organization or removal of children of healthy environments.

5. Moral Analogy

Cause: The poor are sinners and must repent. The World and its people are flawed and immoral.

Cure: Punishment to contain the evil, and change through repentance and rescue.

(Adapted from Harman, 1984)

What attitude toward the poor did Jesus display? Discuss in groups. What perspective does your organization have?

Images of the Poor

Lazy	Insecure	Impersonal
Dependable	Conservative	Progressive
Mature	Emotional	Uncommunicative
Uncooperative	Restless	Helpful
Professional	Frustrated	Concerned
Irresponsible	Confused	Backward
Enthusiastic	Dogmatic	Hard-working
Money-minded	Efficient	Immature
Loyal	Insincere	Idealistic
Undependable	Over-productive	Apathetic
Encouraging	Risk-taking	Responsible
Supportive	Self-controlled	Unprofessional
Over-sensitive	Impulsive	Appreciative
Superficial	Naive	Exploited

1. From the list of adjectives given, which best describes the urban worker? 2. Which best describe the unemployed? 3. Which best describe the rural villager? 4. From the same list, which best describe the average student? 5. Which adjectives best describe your parents? 6. And finally, which adjectives seem to best describe yourself?

The Compassion of the King

This study concludes with a meditation called "Footprints".

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand; one belonging to him and the other to the Lord.

When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.

This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it. 'Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me.'

The Lord replied, 'My son, my precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During

your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.' (Author unknown)