

THE KINGDOM AND THE CHURCH

Adapted from George Eldon Ladd

The Kingdom of God is the dynamic reign of God and the sphere in which it is experienced through Jesus the Messiah. The Kingdom has subjects, Jesus' disciples, who enter it, live under it and are governed by it but they are not the sum total of the Kingdom itself. The Kingdom is the realm of the rule of God; churches are local gatherings of God's kingdom citizens.

The Church is not the Kingdom

It is impossible to substitute 'church' for 'Kingdom' in the teaching of Jesus in the gospels. While there is an inseparable relationship between the Kingdom and the church but they can't really be identified as the same thing. Entering the Kingdom is not the same as entering the church. The Kingdom is invisible, not a phenomenon of the world. The church is an empirical body of human beings. The church is the people of the Kingdom not the sum total of that Kingdom itself.

The Kingdom Creates the Church

The dynamic rule of God, present in the mission of Jesus challenged people to response, bringing them into a new relationship with God and also with each other. The church is the result of the coming of the Kingdom. Proclamation of the Kingdom divides people into those who accept and respond to the message and those who reject the reign of God. Those who respond to God's reign gather together as the church. The Kingdom creates the church. The Kingdom is an action that is likened to the drawing of a net through the sea. It catches in its movement not only good fish but bad; the fish will be sorted out when the net is dragged ashore. Such is the action of the Kingdom; it does not now create a pure fellowship. In Jesus' own fellowship there could even be a traitor. The principles here apply to the church. The eschatological coming of the Kingdom will mean judgement for the world (the tares) and also for the church (the draw net). The fellowship created by the Kingdom may include some who are not true children of the Kingdom. Entrance into the Kingdom means participation in the church; but not vice-versa.

The Church Witnesses to the Kingdom

The mission of the church is to witness to the Kingdom. The church cannot be the Kingdom but by its nature it must witness to the present existence of the Kingdom. One of the main tasks of the church is to display in this age the life and the fellowship of the Age to Come. The church in this age will never attain perfection, it must nevertheless display the life of the perfect order, the eschatological Kingdom of God. Jesus placed great emphasis on forgiveness and humility among his disciples. Concern over greatness is a contradiction of the life of the Kingdom. Humble service rather than self-seeking is a sign of a genuine encounter with the Kingdom. Experiencing divine forgiveness is the prerequisite for genuine human forgiveness. This is the nature of the Kingdom; what is experienced from God must be extended to others. The church witnesses to the present and coming realities of the Kingdom.

The Church is the Instrument of the Kingdom

The disciples are the instruments of the Kingdom in that the works of the Kingdom are performed through them. They too healed the sick and cast out demons. Theirs was a delegated power but it was the same power that worked through Jesus. The power is seen as working through them not a power resident in them. The church can be an instrument of the power of life and fellowship, the Kingdom of God. It must be a missional instrument of the Kingdom.

The Church: The Custodian of the Kingdom

In a very real way the disciples of Jesus are the custodians of the Kingdom. There is a solidarity between Jesus and his disciples as he sends them forth into the world with the good news of the Kingdom. The final destiny of individuals will be determined by the way they react to these representatives of Christ.

Summary

There is an inseparable relationship between the Kingdom and the church; but they are not to be identified as the same. The Kingdom takes its point of departure from God, the church from human life. The Kingdom is God's reign and the realm in which the blessings of his reign are experienced; the church is the fellowship of those who have experienced God's reign and entered into the enjoyment of its blessings. The Kingdom creates the church, works through the church and is proclaimed in the world by the church. There can be no Kingdom without a church - there can be no church without a Kingdom; but they remain two distinguishable concepts: the rule of God and the fellowship of those who seek to obey him.

Implications for Church Health Consultancy

1. Churches do not exist for themselves or their own agenda. They serve a greater purpose of representing the Kingdom of God. The work of church health consultants is also not to serve the church for its own sake or agenda but to serve the kingdom through assisting churches represent it more courageously and faithfully.
2. God works through the church – we to refine our discernment to look, listen for and affirm Kingdom voices, signs and activity as it appears in many ways within the people of God.
3. As consultants, we need a gentle but firm kingdom perspective.