

God's Kingdom within Reach

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“Do you believe in the name of Jesus Christ and the things concerning the Kingdom of God?” These were the words that I affirmed when I was baptized, and maybe you did, too.

The understanding of God's coming kingdom has always been a fundamental teaching within our community. It is taught as a clear hope to us. You've all heard it; Jesus shall return at some future point to establish his kingdom on the earth and reign in Jerusalem on the throne of David forever. Although the future hope of God's kingdom is explicitly taught in scripture, I believe it's not the *only* way Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God.

Jesus' important gospel message wasn't just limited to miracles, signs, and wonders, or his sole purpose limited to a sacrificial death and resurrection. Jesus' gospel of the kingdom of God is much more than the hope of some far-away future event. Is it possible that we have overlooked what Jesus actually had to say about transforming into the Kingdom of God, *here and now*?

The idea of a present kingdom of God may seem at odds with what we observe in life; we look around and see disease, mental illness, addiction, pain, war, suffering, greed, and death. By any metric, the world around us seems to paint a polar opposite picture of a future kingdom that we read about in the Bible. So we conclude there can be no kingdom of God *now*, and it must only be a *future* event.

However, I disagree with this conclusion and believe that Jesus taught those who listened to him an awareness of a present kingdom of God... a way to live in the realization of God's presence, *now*. I'd like to explore some of Jesus' teachings about this present kingdom of God, and how they applied to the lives of those who heard Jesus then and the lives we live now.

Harmonization

Before we proceed, I'd like to draw attention to an important tool we employ when reading and interpreting scripture, especially the New Testament; it's something biblical scholars call

harmonization. Harmonization, in simple terms, is to take separate biblical passages or themes and then merge them together in order to build a single picture. This can be useful for categorizing principles, for teaching, and for the formation of doctrine. It is on this foundation that Christianity itself is built. Harmonization can appear to be helpful by filling out the narrative, but at the same time we must be mindful not to overextend our interpretive task. It's not that harmonization is good or bad, in and of itself, but it's important that we are aware that we may be bringing something into the narrative that may *not* actually be there.

The reason I make this point is because I believe this is exactly how we have traditionally handled the kingdom of God passages. We have used this method of harmonization when reading them, and, as a result, Jesus' teaching of a present kingdom has been forgotten and has fallen between the theological cracks. Maybe we don't understand – or even recognize – what Jesus was actually trying to say, because the concept is presented in a way unfamiliar to us. As a result we simply shrug and pass over it, not realizing we are ignoring an actual stand-alone teaching of Jesus.

The irony isn't lost on me that I, too, am pulling out verses and merging them together in order to paint a big picture. I am attempting to pry them away from the familiarity of other kingdom passages and hopefully create a new category: a new way of seeing how to live in the domain, realm, or rulership of God, *now*.

I can't emphasize this enough: I believe that the teaching of repentance and the teaching of a present kingdom of God are inextricably linked. You cannot have one without the other. And it is my hope that this article will help bring these two somewhat disparate teachings together again.

In the Beginning God Said Let There be Repentance

Both Jesus and John the Baptist open their ministries with the word 'repent'. The primacy of the teaching of repentance in the two earliest gospels shows its centrality in early church tradition. The word 'repent' has shifted a bit in our English language. To us it implies infraction, regret, and then possible reform of the offender. In Greek, the words for repent (*metanoe*) and repentance (*metanioa*) do share this concept of transgression, but focus more on changing one's mind or purpose – on comprehending, reconsidering, perceiving, thinking, understanding, or having a mental perception.

The foundational point I'd like to make here is that repentance can exist without a person being in a state of transgression; rather, repentance is the state of being prepared to *think* differently. Repentance isn't only about sin. Even God is said to have repented:

*And the Lord repented that he had made man on the earth and he was grieved in his heart.
(Gen 6:6)*

So it's possible to have not sinned but still be able to think differently. In the Greek sense of the word, we may repent when we understand new information and we update our view or opinion on a topic – and then act accordingly. To summarize, repentance should always be a perpetual state of mind, not just an occasional act following bad behavior.

John the Baptist and Jesus both presented these ideas hand in hand so to speak. They taught a gospel of changing one's mind, a gospel of changing the way we think... *for the kingdom of God is at hand.*

Think about it like this. We are being told that the way we think – in some very important way – acts as a hinderance to the presence of a kingdom of God. Jesus wouldn't ask us to change the way we think if everything was okay with the way we think.

What Does Jesus Have to Say?

Here are just some passages in which I think Jesus is teaching a present kingdom of God – a current reality to those who listen to him, not just a future kingdom.

So when Jesus saw that the scribe answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." (Mk 12:34, see verses 28-34)

If Jesus was talking about a future kingdom, this response would apply to everyone he spoke to regardless of what they believed. The coming future kingdom is an event that affects all people, not just the scribe. But Jesus pointed out that this scribe's wise answer placed him *not far* from God's kingdom.

Whatever city you enter and they receive you, eat such things as are set before you, and heal the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." But whatever city you enter, and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, "The very dust of your city which clings to us we wipe off against you." Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near to you. (Luke 10:8-11)

The disciples' message communicated a close *proximity* to the kingdom of God regardless of whether the individuals in those cities accepted or rejected it.

Now when he was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation, nor will they say 'see here', or 'see there', for indeed the kingdom of God is within you."¹ (Lk 17:20-21)

Jesus spoke of a kingdom that they can't see coming, because it was already present, in their midst! This sits in contrast with the son coming with the kingdom that everyone would see coming: *As lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven shines to the other part under heaven, so also will be the son of man be in His day.* (Lk 17:24)

There are more passages:

Jesus said to them, "Assuredly I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him. But tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him." (Matt 21:31b-32)

Tax collectors and harlots were entering the kingdom of God right then and there, all by believing in the way of righteousness and following in the way of John the Baptist. They were entering by current belief and action – *while they were alive.*

And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force. (Matt 11:12)

In the relatively short window of Jesus' ministry, Jesus saw that the kingdom of heaven was being overrun by violence! Surely he's not talking of a literal heavenly realm where God's reign was successfully under attack? One can only conclude from such a statement that the Roman occupation of Jerusalem and the influence of seditious Jews was overtaking the possible reign of peace and joy in the lives of believers.

And Jesus called a little child to him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 18:1)

¹ Margin: in your midst

Jesus points out that we need to be converted back into a state of humility, like that of a little child. I'm sure having been around children, you too have observed their willingness to be unassuming, their ability to forgive and move on, and how they receive new experiences with refreshing awe and joy.

And Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.... [U]nless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (John 3:3b,5b)

This passage is one of my favorites. It is one of the most spiritual interactions that Jesus has in the gospels. Lifted right out of the heady literal and logical mind of organized and institutionalized religion, Nicodemus – the religious ruler and teacher of Israel – is pulled into the mystery of metaphor, into what is only seen with the heart. Jesus teaches that being born again and born of the spirit is akin to both seeing and entering God's kingdom.

There is no mention by Jesus in these passages of the kingdom of God as being a distant future event. Rather, he talks about the kingdom in terms of:

- belief now,
- being close in proximity now,
- being immediately located here and now, and
- what is needed to see and enter now.

The kingdom is at hand, it is near, it is among us. But only if we are willing to see it.

The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached and everyone is pressing into it. (Lk 16:16)

Paul: Different Language, Same Principle

Paul also understood the necessary principle of changing our minds. His theology, or gospel as he calls it, takes a clear aim at this subject by employing the dualistic contrast of law vs grace and flesh vs spirit.

He clearly understood that the strict adherence to law couldn't change people's hearts. When Paul talks about this subject, he drops Jesus' metaphors of being born again, becoming like little children, and being close to the kingdom of God. For the sake of his wider audience, he

tends to employ Greek philosophical concepts and Jewish legal metaphors in more of a systematic framework than Jesus did. There are too many to look at now, so here are just a few.

And do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Rom 12:2)

But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. (1Cor 13:10)

In Greek, the word perfect is ‘telios’ which means human integrity, virtue, to be complete, to be full grown and mature.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away, behold all things have become new. (2Cor 5:17)

I think that the apostle Paul absolutely nails the essence of what this present kingdom looks like:

The kingdom of God is not [the legal observation of] food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the holy spirit. (Rom 14:17)

We are exhorted by John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul to turn our sight to our ‘inward man’. This is an actual substance of our faith – to look and always watch what is going on inside our hearts – because that is where the seat of repentance is to be found. Before we can expect to see the present kingdom of God around us clearly, we must first deal with ourselves. Just as Jesus taught us to remove the plank in our own eyes before trying to take the speck out of someone else’s, so repentance must begin at home.

A helpful definition of introspection, borrowed from the 4th step of AA, is that one should make a “searching and fearless moral inventory” of oneself. This can be difficult, uncomfortable, and even painful but this is what the beginning of repentance and changing our minds looks like.

So if there is a present kingdom that requires repentance in order for us to become at least close in proximity, what is it that we have to repent or change our minds from? As I mentioned earlier, repentance doesn’t just mean seeking forgiveness but is, in its fullness, a perpetual state of mind. Not permanent, but perpetual. Think cyclical, moving, flowing, constantly mulling over.

Transitioning into a Perpetual State of Repentance

As adult human beings we are not neutrally-minded. Our lives and perspectives are slowly formed in the first half of our lives by ethnicity, gender, age, wealth, education, culture, religion,

even our postal codes... and the list goes on. All of these act as subconscious filters in our brains through which we see ourselves, others, and the world around us. These filters are called biases. I heard someone compare biases to apps on a smart phone; they're like pre-programmed shortcuts that allow us to perform fast, task-specific actions (which can be helpful and efficient). But it turns out that these shortcuts actually hinder empathy, perspective-taking, self-reflection, and awareness of the larger picture. So these 'useful apps' can sometimes make us unaware, unkind, and insensitive.

Repentance not only appears as outright oral teaching but it's also re-presented to us in pictures and symbols, like Jesus' 'born again' interaction with Nicodemus. Also, seeing and hearing are recurring themes in the Bible, and our attention is especially drawn to this focus in the gospels. Is it any wonder we read of Jesus healing the blind so they can see, healing the deaf so they can hear, and making the lame able to walk? I don't believe for a moment that these healings were only about reversing someone's physiological life circumstances. For me the metaphors are just too powerful to be mere coincidence. These miracles of Jesus also become pictures of how we need to repent – or change our minds – because our biases prevent us from seeing, hearing, and walking in God's kingdom.

Hearing you will hear and not understand, seeing you will see and not perceive. For the heart of this people has grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their heart and turn so that I should heal them. (Matt 13:14-15)

Getting Lost in the Symbols

We also see this need for repenting, healing, or cleaning in the symbol of baptism. It's a picture of death of the old person and their ways, and resurrection of the new person, not of body, but of mind. We've come to associate sin as things we do with the body to break the law. Judaism placed limits on what the body did: "do not touch, do not taste, do not handle". What we do in our bodies is just the symptom of an untransformed mind, not the root of the problem itself.

In many respects baptism and the law of Moses are similar in that they act as signposts pointing to the destination, but are not the destination itself. The law was a schoolmaster to bring

us to Christ just as baptism into Christ is a schoolmaster to bring us to the spiritual rebirth of our minds.²

Jesus didn't come reiterating religious piety or adherence. Instead, he came proclaiming the need to change the root of the problem: "Change your *mind* for the kingdom of God is at hand." Baptism is a symbol of that change. And that's all it can be; the symbol, but not the substance.

We encourage believers to go through the ritual of baptism without even acknowledging its sheer inadequacy to convert and transform the heart and mind. Please don't misunderstand me, both the symbol and ritual are necessary "*that righteousness might be fulfilled*"³ but we can get lost in that symbol. Baptism is a signpost that points us toward the actual destination. The destination is the death of bias and ego as well as the rebirth or resurrection of an *introspective* mind. This is the baptism of repentance that John the Baptist and Jesus taught for the kingdom of God is *at hand*.

To reiterate, the law and baptism are symbols, but not the substance. There is always a pattern of being called *beyond* the signpost. That's what a signpost does, it points to a further destination and lets you know you're on the right path.

In the Beginning God Cursed the Ego

We've talked about the need for being in a state of perpetual repentance, how biases can negatively affect how we see the world around us, and how we can get stuck worshipping at the signpost. Now I'd like to talk about one more stumbling block we have to deal with on the way to spiritual transformation: the ego. If biases are the glasses through which we see the world, then the ego acts more like the judge, jury, and executioner. The ego, or self, is easy to see in others but hard to see in ourselves, just like Jesus' parable of the plank in the eye.

Here are some ways to spot if the ego is in charge. The ego is very insecure, highly reactive, and easily offended. It quickly jumps up to defend, protect, and fight back when we feel challenged or sense our own guilt and shame. Richard Rohr says, "The ego is quick to prove, protect and project." It reminds me of the opening chapters in Genesis.

² Galatians 3:24

³ Matthew 3:15

In Genesis chapter 3 and 4, we read of Adam and Eve's temptation, then Cain's murder of his brother, Abel. Is it any surprise that in these opening stories in scripture we find man's ego and its trait of self-protection being showcased?

God himself sees the ego as the one thing that separates man from living in his presence and He directly curses it as a result. The focus of God's curse on Adam, Eve, and the serpent was their bellies. The curse did not only address the most basic of human instincts – that of self preservation and reproduction – but also the essence of the self. In ancient times the belly and its entrails were seen as the seat of intention, desire, and natural will of the self, a place where the ego would reside.

In his book *The Master and His Emissary*, psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist calls the ego 'predatory'. It calls to mind Genesis 3:7 where God speaks to Cain, "...*sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.*"

"But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days," says the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their heart and I will be their God and they shall be my people." (Jer 32:33)

The Hebrew word for heart here is *Qereb*, which means bowels, entrails, or intestines. In other words, God will write his law in their belly, the place where what comes naturally to man resides. God will do this so that his law would come naturally to them, unlike the natural state of man whose gut instinct is to prove, protect, and project himself.

Introspection and the Act of Contemplation

It is worth noting that in the history of Christianity there have always been, and still are, many distinct Christian traditions and faith practices. There is the charismatic tradition where lively musical praise and spirit gifts are practiced. There is the sacramental tradition where emphasis in the service is placed upon bread and wine. There is the liturgical tradition, whereby repetition of creeds, faith statements, and readings are given, often in call-and-response group format. And finally, there is the contemplative tradition where there are those who spend time dedicated to the practice of reflection upon Christ and their own responses to outside influence.

As Christadelphians we would fall into the sacramental group, where our services are centered around the breaking of bread and drinking of wine. This isn't to say that we exclude

other elements of these traditions, but we have no recognized contemplative tradition or practice within our community.

I believe that in the heart of the gospel message of “*repent for the kingdom of God is at hand*” it is essential for us to develop a practice of contemplation in order to remain keenly aware of how our biases and ego surface in our lives. Unless they are mastered, I don’t believe we can enter the present kingdom of God that Jesus taught.

Contemplation is not about being overly self-conscious or self-critical but rather is an act of sitting with one’s self in silence. Watching what comes in and watching what goes out. External impression, internal expression. I like to think about it as detachment from my thoughts. I sit and watch them go by. In some respects it has been an act of creation, creation of an empty space that was never there before, a gap between stimulus and response so to not act reflexively.

Contemplation starts with a no-holds-barred introspection. With practice this then extends deeper into our lives and slowly becomes a mind-fullness, who we are, hopefully all of the time. Some traditions have called this act the ‘silent witness’ or the ‘friend’. No judgement, just silent observation of the self. This non-self-judgement actually is, in essence, an act of self-love, and it is by this self-love that we begin to change. We do this, not so God can love us, but precisely because He already does. The practice of contemplation feels more like a ‘falling in love’, letting go of the critical and negative thoughts and opening up and out into an overwhelming sense of freedom that then aids to carry us over the threshold of transformation.

Jesus taught us that the kingdom of God is near, close, not far away, among us, within us, and people are pressing into it. To participate in this kingdom we are called to live in a state of deeply honest and perpetual re-cognition. I believe that there is a current reality of true peace and joy that we miss out on because the subtle influence of institutionalized Christianity has shifted our focus far away from the present and, like the Pharisees, has “*shut the kingdom of heaven in front of people*”.⁴ Unhealthy religion refuses to live in the present; it will either push out hope into a distant future or long for traditions of the past.

Christ is calling us to participate in God’s kingdom *right now*.

⁴ Matthew 23:13