

The Kingdom of God

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The terms *kingdom of God* and *kingdom of heaven* are frequently found in Holy Scripture and in contemporary Christian usage. Yet there is widespread disagreement on the meaning and application of the terms. Some of this disagreement is a simple matter of interpretation on minor points, but some of it is crucial, challenging even the fundamental tenets of traditional evangelical and Pentecostal beliefs. For this reason it is appropriate to articulate those essential aspects of the kingdom of God that are commonly held by the Assemblies of God.

Linguistic Meaning of the Term *Kingdom*

The primary meaning of *malkuth* (Hebrew) and *basileia* (Greek) is the authority, reign, or rule of a king. The territory, subjects, and operations of the kingdom are secondary meanings.

The kingdom of God is the sphere of God's rule (Psalm 22:28).¹ Though rightfully under God's rule, fallen human beings nonetheless participate in universal rebellion against God and His authority (1 John 5:19; Revelation 11:17,18). However, by faith and obedience men and women turn from their rebellion, are regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and become a part of the Kingdom and its operation. While participation in the kingdom of God is not compulsory, the Kingdom is present, whether or not people recognize and accept it.

The Kingdom is variously described as "kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 13:11), "kingdom of God" (Mark 4:11), "kingdom of Christ and of God" (Ephesians 5:5), and "kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (Revelation 11:15). Jesus sometimes spoke of it as "my kingdom" (Luke 22:30). Paul, referring to Christ Jesus, called it "his kingdom" (2 Timothy 4:1). All these terms refer to the one kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament

"Kingdom of the Lord" occurs once in the Old Testament: *malkuth Yahweh* (1 Chronicles 28:5). There are of course many occurrences of "kingdom" denoting earthly territory or domain. "Dominion" or "rule" is occasionally the translation for the idea of God's authority and power (Psalms 22:28; 66:7; 103:19; 145:11–13). Throughout the Old Testament (but especially in the Psalms and the Prophets) the idea of God as King ruling over His creation and over Israel is clearly expressed. Although God's immediate kingship is evident in the Old Testament, there is also a strong emphasis on a future fulfillment of God's universal rule. This anticipation often coincides with messianic expectations associated with both the first and second advents (cf. Isaiah 9:6,7; 11:1–12; 24:21–23; 45:22,23; Zechariah 14:9). Daniel describes God's rule as "an eternal dominion" and a "kingdom [that] endures from generation to generation." (4:34).

¹All Bible quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New International Version (NIV).

The Kingdom in the New Testament

While the idea of the universal rule of God permeates the Old Testament, the kingdom of God takes on additional meaning and importance in the teaching and ministry of Jesus that begins with the proclamation, “The kingdom of God is near” (Mark 1:15; cf. Matthew 3:2; 4:17). Although Jesus never specifically defined the Kingdom, He illustrated it through parables (Matthew 13; Mark 4) and demonstrated its presence and power in His ministry. He instructed His disciples to proclaim the nearness of the Kingdom as He sent them out in missionary ministry (Matthew 10:7; Luke 9:2; 10:9,11). Every description of Jesus Christ as Lord is a reminder that Christ is ruler of the kingdom of God.

From the various contexts of the word *kingdom* in the Gospels, the rule of God is seen as (1) a present realm or sphere into which people are entering now and (2) a future apocalyptic order into which the righteous will enter at the end of the age.

Thus the kingdom of God is both a present reality and a promise of future fulfillment. The Kingdom was present on earth in the person and acts of Jesus during the time of His Incarnation. After the Resurrection, the Risen Christ is present by His Spirit, and where His Spirit is, the Kingdom is present. While the Kingdom is manifested in the Church, the Kingdom is not limited to the Church. The fullness of the kingdom awaits a final apocalyptic arrival at the end of this age (Matthew 24:27,30,31; Luke 21:27–31).

The State of the Kingdom Now

Just as some who followed Jesus “thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once” (Luke 19:11), certain groups today are expecting Christians to usher in the fullness of the Kingdom in an earthly rule. When the Pharisees asked Jesus at what time the kingdom of God would come, He answered, “[T]he kingdom of God is within [*entos*, “within,” “in the midst,” or “among”] you” (Luke 17:21). The restored reign of God was soon to be a reality, for the One who was to reclaim the usurped territory was on earth to accomplish His work of redemption. The overthrow of Satan’s dominion had already begun. Today, the redemptive work is complete, yet the reality of the ultimate Kingdom is qualified. In the present age, the power of the Kingdom does not halt aging or death. Though God does at times miraculously overrule natural laws by sovereign act or in response to the prayer and faith of believers, the Kingdom still works through fallible human beings. The Church has a powerful healing influence on the world, but final restoration will not occur prior to the Second Coming. Righteous political and social actions vitally enhance public life, but the main thrust of the Kingdom is the spiritual transformation of persons who together form the body of Christ. The Millennium and the ultimate expressions of the Kingdom will not come without the physical return of Jesus Christ to the earth (Luke 21:31). The Kingdom is already present, but not yet complete. It is both present and future.

The interim between the first and second advents of Christ (the present age) is marked by forceful spiritual confrontation between the power of the Kingdom and the powers that dominate the world in this present age. Putting on the full armor of God, believers must engage the forces of darkness (Ephesians 6:12).

We are not guaranteed total, instant success in this conflict. Each victory over sickness, sin, oppression, or the demonic is a reminder of the present power of the Kingdom and of the final victory to come, a victory made sure by the resurrection of Christ. We are called to wage war against sickness, but we face the reality that not everyone we pray for gets well. We do not surrender to the evil and the struggles of the present order; but neither do we rage against God or blame others when every request is not granted. The essence of the Spirit-energized life is to move against the forces of darkness, fully aware that total deliverance is always possible but does not always come immediately (cf Romans 8:18–23). Some of the heroes of faith (Acts 12:2; Acts 12:2; 2 Corinthians 11:23 to 12:10; Hebrews 11) suffered, even died, having their deliverance deferred to a future time. We do not give in to the ravages of evil. As instruments of the Kingdom in this present age, we faithfully battle against evil and suffering.

The Holy Spirit and the Kingdom of God

As Pentecostals we recognize the role of the Holy Spirit in the inauguration and ongoing ministry of the Kingdom. At His baptism, Jesus was anointed with the Spirit (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22). His acts of power, energized by God's Spirit, brought healing to the sick and spiritual restoration to sinful men and women. The descent of the Spirit at His baptism was a significant point in the ministry of Jesus. "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert" (Luke 4:1). The working of the Spirit in the ministry of Jesus attested to the presence of the Kingdom.

Jesus described the role of the Holy Spirit in the kingdom of God. As part of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, He told His disciples, "You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5). The power of the Kingdom, manifest in the Cross, the Resurrection, and the Ascension, was passed on to all who would be filled with the Spirit. The age of the Spirit is the age of the Church, which being Spirit-created is also the community of the Spirit. Working primarily through the Church but without being confined to the Church, the Spirit continues the Kingdom ministry of Jesus himself.

The Kingdom as a Future Reality

Biblical charismata, anointed proclamation of the Word, and confirming signs and wonders are distinguishing marks of the kingdom of God, at work from the time of Christ until now. The kingdom of Satan has already been invaded by Jesus in the power of the Spirit (Matthew 12:25–29; Colossians 1:13; 2:15). Yet final destruction of Satan and complete victory over all evil is part of a future eschatological consummation (Revelation 20:10).

We believe in the premillennial return of Christ before the thousand-year period described in Revelation 20. We believe that we are living in the last days of the present age. The next major fulfillment of Bible prophecy will be the Rapture, at which time the dead in Christ will be resurrected and the Church will be caught up from the earth, forever to be with the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:51,52; 1 Thessalonians 4:14–17). We believe that the rapture of the Church is imminent (Mark 13:32–37), that it will take place before the Great Tribulation (1 Thessalonians 4:17,18; 5:9), and that it is the "blessed

hope” (Titus 2:13) to which we look even while signs in the heavens and on earth signal the approaching end of this age (Luke 21:25–28).

The second coming of Christ not only includes the physical rapture of the saints but it is also followed by the visible return of Christ with His saints to reign on the earth for one thousand years (Zechariah 14:5; Matthew 24:27,30; Revelation 1:7; 19:11–14; 20:1–6). Satan will be bound and inactive for the first time since his rebellion and fall (Revelation 20:2). This millennial reign of Christ will institute a time of universal peace (Psalm 72:3–8; Isaiah 11:6–9; Micah 4:3–4) for the first time since before the fall of man. As promised in the Scriptures, “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26) and brought into the millennial reign (Ezekiel 37:21,22; Zephaniah 3:19,20; Romans 11:26,27).

The Kingdom and the Church

The kingdom of God is not the Church. Yet there is an inseparable relationship between the two. The true Church is the Body of which Christ is the head (Ephesians 1:22,23; Colossians 1:18). It is a spiritual fellowship that includes all who have believed, or will believe, in Christ as Savior from the Church’s inception until the time God takes it out of the world.

The kingdom of God existed before the beginning of the Church and will continue after the work of the Church is complete. The Church is therefore part of the Kingdom, but not all of it. In the present age the kingdom of God is at work most visibly through the Church. When the gospel of the Kingdom has been proclaimed “in the whole world as a testimony to all nations” (Matthew 24:14), the drama of end-time events will begin. Finally, Christ will reign in majesty over His eternal Kingdom, which will include the Church glorified.

The Kingdom of God and the Kingdoms of Earth

The kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world exist side by side at the present time. However, these kingdoms will not be one and the same until Christ returns and the kingdoms of this world become “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Revelation 11:15). The kingdom of God may operate within, but is not to be identified with, any present political system. Believers take the gospel of the Kingdom into the world so that individuals may voluntarily choose the lordship of Jesus Christ.

While revealing that all human government is currently, to some extent, under the influence of the evil one (Daniel 10:13,20; John 12:31; 14:30; Ephesians 6:12; 1 John 5:19), the Bible nonetheless teaches that government is ordained by God to maintain order and punish evildoers (Romans 13:1–7). Governmental authorities are God’s servants (Romans 13:6) whether they recognize it or not. Ideals of justice and decency found in government and society are the legacy of God’s grace in the world (Romans 1:20; 2:14). Though they may be in rebellion, the kingdoms of the world are yet responsible to God and must be called to account for injustice and wickedness.

Although the kingdom of God is not a present political entity, the citizens of the Kingdom are responsible to exert a positive influence on their society. While the Bible

does not give clear guidelines for Christian action in combating the social evils embedded in the structures of our society, and sincere believers will differ on the means to be employed, Christians clearly are to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13,14). They are to be concerned about the needy (James 1:27; 2:16) and the oppressed (James 5:4–6). Filled with the Spirit, and given the opportunity to influence society, they are impelled to denounce unjust laws (Isaiah 10:1,2) and to seek justice and goodness (Amos 5:14,15; Micah 6:8).

At the same time, and without contradiction of their servant role, God’s children should be in the world, but not of it (John 17:11,14,16). The kingdom of God (God’s rule in our lives) is demonstrated in and through us by “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17).

The kingdom of God is not the blueprint for a radical cultural change based on some carnal theocratic or revolutionary agenda. Instead, it radically changes human personalities and lives. Through men and women who recognize its authority and live by its standards, the kingdom of God invades the stream of history. This process began with godly pre-flood humans, found early expression in theocratic Israel, drew near in the person of the Messiah, has been advancing through the Church, and will be completed in the dominion of Christ at the end of the age.

Erroneous Views of the Kingdom of God

Doctrines regarding the kingdom of God tend to err toward one of two extremes. One extreme assumes that the Kingdom accomplishes too little during the Church Age. The other maintains that the Kingdom accomplishes too much. Some emphasize the heavenly nature of the Kingdom, and expect little supernatural expression on earth. Since the fulfillment of the Kingdom is yet future, the Church may too quickly retreat from social and civic responsibility. Others locate the Kingdom primarily on earth. They claim that most of the supernatural power of the Kingdom is currently available to a militant Church and that the fulfillment of the Kingdom will occur during the Church Age. Both of these extremes must be avoided.

Your Kingdom Come

Christ taught His disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10). The Kingdom is already among us in that it has invaded Satan’s domain and has assured final victory. The Kingdom comes in a measure whenever a person receives Christ as Savior, is healed or delivered, or is touched in any way by the divine. Yet the future consummation of the kingdom of God—the time when all evil and rebellion will be eliminated—is the fervent hope of the Christian. So with the disciples we pray, “Your kingdom come”—both now and when Christ returns.

The rapture of the Church, the coming of Christ for His own, will set in motion the events that lead to the consummation of the eternal Kingdom. “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). With John the beloved revelator we say, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).