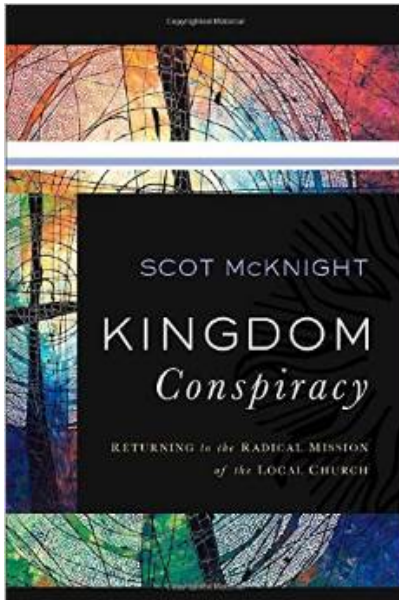


The Church and the kingdom of God

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I woke up in the morning to some interesting dialogue on Twitter. Apparently Scot McKnight has a new book, which I have not read, and it is getting some attention for his polemics around “skinny jeans” and “pleated pants” Christians’ understanding of the kingdom of God. It is not those categories that was controversial, but rather his actual claims about what the kingdom of God is, or isn’t. This is not a review of his book, I do not plan on reading or reviewing the book, so you must go elsewhere for that. However, I did want to problematize the main point I saw in [a review](#) David Fitch, a friend and seminary colleague of McKnight, brought attention to in his book. ***The claim McKnight supposedly made was that the kingdom of God is the Church, and that there is no kingdom of God outside of the Church.*** That is an echo of Cyprian from the 3rd century, but applied in a new way, to the kingdom of God in this contemporary case, which needs brief responding to.

It should be no surprise that I see this read as both irresponsible and problematic as an interpretation. I will argue based on my reading of the Jesus narratives in scripture and with strong support from an early Church teaching, pointing to a different understanding of the kingdom of God than McKnight does. Furthermore, by attempting to make such a claim, I suggest it diminishes the particularity of Jesus’ own poetic descriptions of the kingdom of God in the parables, the very content I assume McKnight is mostly drawing from in his book to come to such conclusions.

Before the primary critique, it should be said that McKnight is not completely wrong on everything. First, my take is that he understands that there are very real spatial realities to be considered when discussing the kingdom of God, though “geopolitical” is problematic because it moves us back to a place of dominating land and space.

The kingdom of God is something present in particular spaces. Secondly, a kingdom inevitably does include both a king and a people in particular spaces. It seems that McKnight does not want people to lose sight of the King and people that make for a kingdom. These points are not insignificant, and to completely lose sight of those things does cause room for other problems. However, we cannot draw a clean line from the realities of earthly kingdoms to that of the kingdom of God. It is precisely the fact that the kingdom of God, as it was revealed and announced by Jesus, surprised and shocked many, helping us understand that it must not be assumed or predicted ahead of time as though we can expect from general common sense what it would be. Rather, only after careful attentiveness to the gospel narratives, read alongside the least of these in community, can we begin to venture to say something meaningful about the kingdom of God.

One of the big stumbling blocks for McKnight seems to come out of him falling into ‘churchology’. That is, McKnight here is operating out of a weak Christology and Pneumatology in relation to his understanding of the kingdom of God, which inevitably slips him away from ecclesiology and into churchology. ***Ecclesiology is about being called out, to gather around Jesus the crucified One as his people, and to embody the life and teachings of Jesus together.*** On the other hand churchology takes for granted the presence of Jesus, as a matter of fact (for whatever theological reasons), and the alignment of God’s mission and will, with any particular gathering or institution. Churchology is dangerous. It is a new-Christendom for the 21st century, in which a community assumes that they are part of what God is doing in creation, just because they think so. ***Ecclesiology realizes how easy it is to lose Jesus along the way (Luke 2:41-52), to have him on the outside of what we’ve got going on (Luke 3:19-20). The kingdom of God is not automatic for a gathered people who call themselves Christian, nor is it confined by the limits of Christian gatherings.***

Simply put, the kingdom of God is anywhere King Jesus is present in any particular place. The most important thing to remember about the kingdom of God is not the Church (though there is close association between the two) but it is Jesus himself. ***For this reason Origen famously described Jesus as “autobasileia”.***

Jesus embodied the reign of God all by himself! That means that wherever Jesus is present, the kingdom of God has come near! Now certainly the Church should be a place that Jesus is truly present, a space in which people are reorienting their lives and social arrangements according to the reality of the Messiah. Yet we know that is not always the case.

To have everything but Jesus is to be absent from the presence of the in-breaking reign of God. However, just because Jesus is present still does not mean that we can say that the kingdom of God is defined by the boundaries of the Church. ***For the Church to be the kingdom of God made visible means that it is a community that has rearranged its life around the Lord Jesus.*** This type of kingdom is actually anti-kingdom (Matthew 20-25-26), in the sense that it is a great reversal of everything we know and understand about earthly kingdoms. What does it look like when Jesus reigns among a people? Poor masses are fed, Samaritan outcasts are embraced, and vulnerable women are stood with. That is the life of Jesus, the reign of God embodied and made visible within creation. ***For the Church to be the Kingdom of God means that it is embodying Jesus-shaped life through the Spirit of God as a community. It means it is literally the body of Christ made visible in creation.***

Yet that still is about the Church being the kingdom of God made visible in its embodied presence, not the limits of the kingdom of God. ***I want to be clear here, the kingdom of God is by no means limited by the boundaries of the Church. The kingdom of God now resides everywhere the Spirit of Christ is present.*** If Jesus ought to be understood as the seed of the Kingdom, which is the case I am contending here, and if Jesus is articulated by Paul as being present in Spirit, hence the term 'Spirit of Christ', then Jesus is present in many places beyond church boundaries. So the next question to ask Mcknight would be if he think that the Spirit of Christ is bound to the confines of the Church? Is Jesus present in Spirit in particular spaces outside of the Church? Does the Spirit of Christ ever come alongside the malnourished child, the black body about to be lynched, or a vulnerable woman facing death-dealing yet intimate violence in her own home? Is the Spirit of Christ unable to break beyond those barriers? Of course it is clear where I stand. The kingdom is at hand for them, because Jesus is present in that space with them. ***Please carefully note that I am not suggesting that socially vulnerable people automatically participate in the kingdom of God (kingdom citizenship) matter of fact, but rather that Jesus is present with***

the oppressed and defenseless of society (kingdom at hand). If the Spirit of Jesus is not blocked off by the boundary of the Church then it means that kingdom of God is at hand for many people outside of the Church. I don't know how anyone could read the four gospel narratives and conclude that Jesus operates any differently than as described here.

It seems clear, even in a brief survey of the New Testament that Jesus often claimed the presence of the kingdom of God as being near, at hand, or among them at times simply because King Jesus was present. Jesus understood that his ministry empowered by the Spirit, meant that "the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). The activity of the Spirit, aka "the finger of God" is also the reign of God come near, without the Church in the picture being necessary (Luke 11:20). And it is precisely that ministry of Jesus "with the Holy Spirit and power and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him" that made the kingdom visible throughout Jesus' life (Acts 10:38). ***When Paul proclaimed the Kingdom of God he wasn't referring to the Church but he did teach Jesus as the center of it all (Acts 28:31).***

I also must note that the kingdom of God should not be so quickly identified by any people that are not characterized by the new social arrangements Jesus taught and lived out, that is a community where the poor and oppressed are in privileged positions. The kingdom of God has particular characteristics and to talk about the presence of the kingdom absent of the specificity of Jesus' portrait of it is ideological appropriation. When the Church is identified at times (though as seen, not exclusively) with the kingdom, is in many of Jesus' parables. ***With actual attention to the specific content of these passages it is pretty evident that Jesus' kingdom can be known by the manifestation of a community where the poor, lame, sick, and outcasts of society are centralized as honored guests.*** That is usually the meaning of Jesus' frequent talk about the banquet table. James understood this as well, arguing that God chose the poor of the world to be heirs of the kingdom (James 2:5). So even when the kingdom of God is found and identified among a particular people gathered around Jesus, we know it is truly so when the last of society are now first. ***This means that Christian communities in the United States that always privilege white male, wealthy, or educated people hegemonically and hierarchically from the top-down, then they reflect communities in which***

the reign of God is being rejected for something more akin to the current oppressive social order. The eruption of the kingdom of God concretely in society is clearly tied to the socially marginalized being restored and honored at the center of the community, if we are to take Jesus seriously. Repentance is walking away from participating in the old social order and voluntarily embodying the life of Jesus and participating in the kingdom of God. That requires being in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ and reconfiguring our social relationships according to his life and teachings, a radical vision of a reconfigured social arrangement.

Given time limitations, I had to put this together quick, but certainly so much more could be said. However, it is important that we do not too quickly identify every Christian community with the kingdom of God, and we cannot agree that the reign of God is limited to the confines of the Church. This is the case because the primary ingredient for the kingdom of God is not the Church, it is Jesus.