

*The Good News of the Kingdom*

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## Evangelism, Church, and Kingdom

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Evangelism, Church and Kingdom of God—these are the three central themes in the modern missionary movement. How we define and relate them determines our mission paradigm and practice.

### Reductionism

One of the driving forces in modernity is the search for a Grand Unified Theory (GUT) that integrates a field of study using one system of explanation. For the most part, this search for unity has been achieved in the sciences by resorting to reductionism. One theory is used to explain reality, and other theories are seen as derivative. For example, the physical sciences explain reality in material terms and reduce biological processes to chemistry. Psychology accounts for humans in psychological terms and treats social and cultural phenomena as epiphenomenal.

Reductionism is also widespread in modern missiological circles. We try to integrate the mission vision by focusing on one central theme.

### Evangelism

Some missiologists emphasize the priority of evangelism (figure 1, model 1; see p. 154). Without this, they argue, there will be no visible church and no manifestations of the Kingdom in lands where the Gospel has never been preached.

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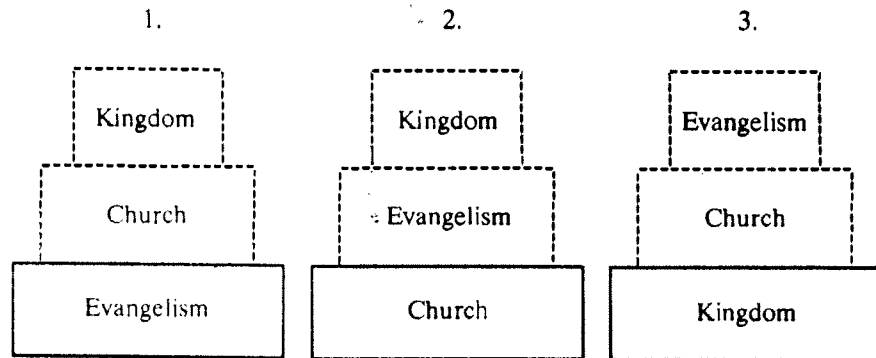
This conviction has motivated missionaries to go to "unevangelized" tribes and villages at the ends of the earth and to give their lives so that all might hear and believe the good news of salvation. The church around the world today is largely a product of their labors.

One example is the Student Volunteer Movement, with its motto, "The evangelization of the world in this generation." For Mott this meant that the salvation offered by Christ be "made known to all so that all might believe in him and be saved (Scherer 1987, 15). The task of discipling converts was secondary, and assigned to the church and its leaders.

This paradigm, however, is weak. First, it often leads to a shallow Christianity because there was little follow-up of new converts. For example, during the peak of the mission movement in India and Africa, sending agencies instituted comity to minimize duplication and competition. Under comity a missionary couple was assigned from two to four hundred villages which they alone were responsible to evangelize. The standard method was "touring." The missionary went from village to village holding one- or two-night evangelistic services in each. Converts were given a day or two of instruction and then turned over to "native" itinerant pastors who often had more than ten to twenty village gatherings to supervise. Many visited the new converts for a few hours once or twice a month. Many converts turned back to their old faith due to opposition, persecution, and lack of instruction and the support of a Christian community. Those who stood firm had little knowledge of biblical truth or life. The result was a shallow Christianity plagued by syncretism (Luke and Carman 1968).

Second, this approach has a flawed ecclesiology. Those who emphasize

**Figure 1**  
**Reductionist Models of Missions**



evangelism often give little attention to building churches into mature communities of faith and witness. Developing worship, fellowship, ministry, leadership, and Christian growth is left to others. These tasks are not seen as important as evangelism. In a sense, the church becomes a holding pen in which Christians wait until God takes them to heaven.

Third, salvation is defined in modern individualistic terms. It has to do with a person's relationship to God, not people. Faith is privatized and spiritualized. Success is measured by the number of converts, not transformed lives. Peace, justice and other social concerns are secondary tasks needed to keep the church busy until Christ returns. But an "individual gospel without a social gospel is a soul without a body and a social gospel without an individual gospel is a body without a soul" (Jones 1972, 40).

### **Church**

A second reductionism places priority on the church (figure 1, model 2) as the agent and goal of missions. Christ is preparing the church as a covenant community, and it gathers to worship God, strengthen the believers, and carry out evangelism. Our task in missions, therefore, is to build the church. To do so, we must organize congregations, train leaders, and nurture children in faith. It is the church that preserves the Gospel from generation to generation despite opposition and persecution.

The strength of this paradigm is its concern with worship, Christian community, and spiritual growth. It sees the church as God's light in this world.

One danger in this approach is that the Church becomes ingrown and self-serving and loses its sense of evangelism. There are so many needs in the church, and so little time and resources that urgency of evangelism is lost. Among the mainline denominations, this shift to church-centered missions is seen in the relationship between the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches. The Edinburgh (1910) Conference marked the high point of the modern western mission movement. Its very success, however, produced young churches around the world that wanted to join the global Christian community. The result was the formation of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam (1948). The presence of young churches in largely unevangelized countries raised the question of who should do missions in these lands—foreigners or nationals. Given the growing anti-colonial ethos around the world, the answer increasingly was nationals. Missions became interchurch fellowship and interchurch aid. In the end, the WCC absorbed the IMC in New Delhi (1961). Lesslie Newbigin, then secretary of the IMC, warned that the merger could lead to a loss of mission vision (1958). This, in fact, took place. The missionary vision became diffused and fragmented in the mainline churches.

The evangelicals of North America continued to stress evangelism, but many of them became church-centered for another reason, namely by institutionalization. Churches, schools, and hospitals were built. In time these, like all institutions, demanded more resources and became self-centered (Weber 1968). Many evangelical churches maintained the rhetoric of evangelism, but in practice assigned their resources and best personnel to minister to the church. Evangelism became one among many of their projects.

A second danger is that this approach focuses on our human efforts. We come to believe that we build the church by planning, programs, and activities. We leave little place for prayer and God to work in extraordinary ways.

### *Kingdom*

A third group in missions focuses on the Kingdom of God as the central theme of missions (figure 1, model 3). Conversion and church, they point out, are not ends in themselves, but means to proclaim the Kingdom already come. This view was dominant at the Melbourne Conference of 1980, with its theme, "Your Kingdom Come." Krister Stendahl noted that the Lord's Prayer is "a sustained cry for the coming of the Kingdom" (Scherer 1987, 132). Ernst Käsemann said, "Christians and church communities are credible only as long as people hear issuing from them the passionate cry, 'Your kingdom come'" (1980, 61). Jesus himself came preaching the Kingdom and referred to it more than a hundred times. Our central task, therefore, is to proclaim justice and peace in a world full of oppression and wars. This is the good news of the gospel here and now.

The shift from a focus on church to that of Kingdom was seen in the WCC following the conference in Willingen. J. C. Hoekendijk criticized the church-centered missionary framework and called for a focus on the world and its needs. Mission increasingly was equated with bringing in the Kingdom (Scherer 1987, 107).

The strength of this paradigm is its concern for righteousness on earth and its encompassing view of the mission of the church. No narrow view here. Mission is not finished until the Kingdom has fully come and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. We must advance righteousness on earth (some add "by force, if need be").

One weakness of this view is that too often it loses sight of the lostness of human beings without Christ and the urgency of evangelism. Arthur Glasser pointed out in 1983 that "[The] church has never been so harassed and troubled by voices calling for the reduction or abandonment of [evangelism]—and for the reconceptualization of its message and mission in terms of social justice, international peace, racial integration, and the elimination of poverty" (1983, 30).

Another weakness is that the church becomes a political player in the

arena of world politics. It is no longer a countercultural community on earth, a prophetic voice of the reign of God in the lives of his people. Or Christianity becomes a civil religion, used to justify democracy, capitalism, individual rights, and western civilization.

**Partial Integration**

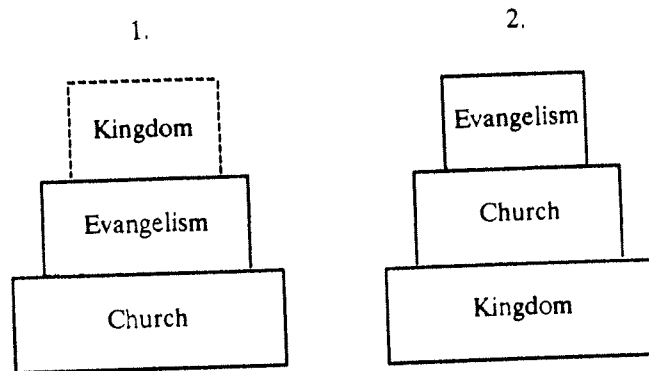
Many in missions have sought to counter the modern tendencies toward reductionism. They combine evangelism, church, and kingdom in various ways to develop a more complete paradigm of the church's missionary task (figure 2).

*Evangelism and Church*

Early in the modern mission movement, leaders such as Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson tied evangelism to church planting (figure 2, model 1). They kept evangelism, but defined its goal as vital, autonomous, missionary churches. Roland Allen (1927), and later Donald McGavran (1980) made church planting the end of evangelism. They argued that evangelism is not complete until converts are incorporated into living churches. True churches must be defined in terms of their continuing growth and the multiplication of congregations.

The strength of this view is that it ties evangelism to the planting of churches. Evangelism without the church is incomplete. The church without evangelism is infirm. When we have both, we have a vital, growing church.

**Figure 2**  
**Attempts at an Integrated Model of Missions**



One weakness of this model is its human centeredness. Like all the paradigms we have surveyed so far, the focus is on what *we* do in missions. It is *we* who plan and carry out mission. If we fail, mission dies. This, indeed, is an arrogant view of mission.

Another weakness is its lack of concern for the poor and oppressed. E. Stanley Jones notes, "We made [the Kingdom] innocuous by reducing it to ecclesiasticism, the Church is the Kingdom; denominationalism, the particular denomination is the Kingdom; the nation is the Kingdom; the particular type of experience is the Kingdom; and so on" (1972, 30). We view ministry to human needs as secondary in view of the urgency of eternal salvation. In so doing, we have divorced spirit from body, future from present, and the Gospel from its fruits.

### *Evangelism, Church, and Kingdom*

Some attempts have been made to unite evangelism, church, and kingdom in a single paradigm. Here the emphasis is on God's Kingdom, which has come wherever people gather in Christ's name, and will come in its fullness with the return of Christ. Our mission, therefore, is to bring the lost into the church and the church into a prophetic ministry in the world.

There is much strength in this approach. It brings together the various strands of the mission task into a single cord. It has a broad enough view to avoid parochialisms. Above all, it sees missions as the work of God in which he calls his people to participate.

There are dangers, however. If we speak of missions as *missio dei* but do not define *dei*, we are free to equate the Kingdom with our own utopias — with Marxism, capitalism, and socialism. We can also unite with other religions that worship God to work for a heaven on earth and, in the process, deny the uniqueness of Christ and the Gospel. We end up weltering in conflicting relativisms of untethered ecumenism.

There is another danger, namely that we lose sight of the importance of evangelism and of the church. The focus is on the Kingdom on earth, rather than on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is captured in the phrase widely used after the New Delhi conference, "The world sets the agenda" (Scherer 1987, 107).

Somehow with our modern mind-set, we find it hard to keep a balance between three centers. Either evangelism, or the church, or the Kingdom is neglected in the implementation. We are unable to keep a burning commitment to all three.

### **The King and the Kingdom**

Our paradigms are flawed if we begin missions with human activity. Mission is not primarily what we do. It is what God does. But we must

define *dei* in terms of the triune God of the Bible (figure 3).

As Arthur Glasser has constantly reminded us, we must begin with the work of the Father, who in creation made humans in his image for fellowship with him and who ever reaches out to save those who repent and return to him. We must focus on the work of Jesus Christ, who made salvation possible in his incarnation and opened the door for reconciliation and fellowship. Regarding this, Jones writes, “[A] rediscovery of the Kingdom without the rediscovery of the King would . . . be a half-discovery, for it would be a kingdom without a king . . . Jesus shows us what God is like and also shows us what the kingdom of God is like in operation. The kingdom of God is Christlikeness universalized” (1972, 34).

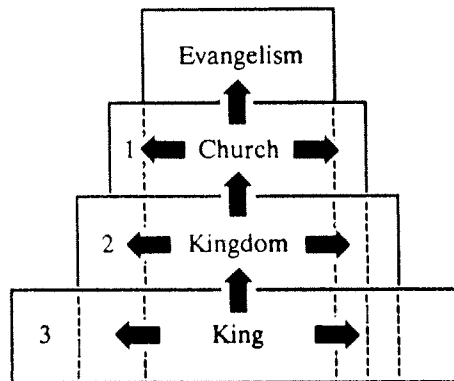
We must stress the work of the Holy Spirit, who works to bring us to repentance and to empower us in victorious Christian living.

With the King comes the Kingdom. The two are inseparably linked. When we preach Christ as Savior and Lord, we speak of his rule in the lives of his people.

Matthew makes it clear that Christ’s coming was a threat to the established kingdoms of the earth. He was heralded as a king at birth (2:2). He made the Kingdom of God his message (4:17), and called it the Good News—the Gospel (4:23, Luke 4:43). He made it the first petition of the Lord’s Prayer (6:10) —“Thy kingdom come (not thy church)” and defined it in the second —“Thy will be done.”

In the end he was tried for treason by the Jewish and Roman courts and

**Figure 3**  
**King, Kingdom, Church and Evangelism**



- Key: 1 = church activities other than evangelism  
 2 = God’s rule outside the church  
 3 = God’s being outside of creation



killed as all insurrectionists were — on a cross (Yoder 1972). The high court in heaven found Jesus innocent, and Satan and humans wicked. It raised him from the dead and placed him on his lawful throne, and cast out the principalities and powers that had opposed him. Ironically, his death, which looked like defeat, was the means by which God wrought salvation for those who turn to him in repentance. In the end, every knee, in heaven and on earth, will bend before the King (Phil. 2:9–11). The implications of the King and the Kingdom for missions are far-reaching. First, God is at work in the affairs of nations to bring about his rule on earth. Moreover, he is at work in the lives of the people to whom we minister, long before we come and long after we leave. It is he that saves, not we. It is he that builds the church, not we.

Missions must be rooted, therefore, in prayer and the leading of God. We should make plans and use strategies, but these must always be open to sudden and total change as the Lord of the harvest issues his commands. The history of missions is full of the serendipities of God. We labor long and hard, and see little results. But suddenly there is a great harvest outside our program. A chance meeting here, an unexpected convert there lead to an explosion of the church in the most unlikely fields. As Art Glasser reminds us (1990b), the apparent failure of missions in China is turning into one of the greatest harvests in our century.

Second, a stress on the King and Kingdom gives us a sense of urgency. The King is returning to set up his Kingdom in person. We are preparing for his return. This eschatological dimension of mission keeps us from becoming too institutionalized in the church and too at home in this world. Mission always has a temporary spirit about it.

Third, a stress on the King and Kingdom keeps us from becoming self-centered as individuals and as churches. It points us to the world that is lost and broken outside the reign of Christ. Glasser points out,

[T]he only acceptable response that can be made to God's gracious gift of the kingdom is to put oneself consciously and deliberately under Christ's rule and embrace this new pattern of values and services. This involves repentance, faith and submission. Those who do not "obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus . . . shall suffer the persecution of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might." (Glasser 1983, 38)

The Kingdom points us to the church. Here the King is worshiped, and here he delights to dwell. The church is the manifestation, however imperfect, of the Kingdom. It is to be a living example to the world of a covenant community of reconciliation that breaks down the human hostilities between races, classes, and genders. It is to be a servant community in which all care for one another.

The Kingdom motivates us to do evangelism, because we want to see

God's honor and rule extended to all people. Evangelism is the central task of the church on earth, because it is the one function the church can do better here than in heaven. Worship and fellowship, these it will do better in heaven.

*Kerygma* and *diaconia* — these two must go together because they are the witness of the Kingdom in a fallen world. We minister to the poor and oppressed because that is the character of the Kingdom. We actively invite people to enter the Kingdom because they are lost outside it.

Kingdom, Church, and Evangelism — we need all three to develop a biblical theology of mission. We need to get beyond the reductionisms of our western mind-set. But we must center these three on the person of Jesus Christ, God as missionary and Lord of Creation. Then we can keep evangelism, church and Kingdom in focus. This was the vision that Arthur Glasser gave to me.