Models of the Kingdom: Sorting out the Practical Meaning of God's Reign

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THE BIBLICAL THEME

The Kingdom of God is a central biblical theme, but it can be understood in very different ways. Cyclically the Kingdom or Reign of God has been either stressed or relatively ignored in the history of Christian thought and action. Currently we seem to be in a time of renewed interest in this biblical theme as well as debate as to the appropriateness of monarchy language in a time of democratic, participatory models of society.

In the last decade or two, both Charismarties and Evangelical social activists have found the Kingdom of God to be a helpful thome in understanding God's work in the world today and God's agenda for the future. The Kingdom is also being stressed as a prominent theme in other branches of the Church, most notably the Ecumenical Movement.

This article examines different conceptions of the Kingdom of God by outlining eight "models" or basic metaphors for understanding the Kingdom. In sketching the models I will give both historical and contemporary examples.

THE USE OF MODELS

I use models as a way to dispel the vague cloud of confusion that often forms around the theme of the Kingdom of God. Rather than a biblical exposition on the Kingdom, my approach here is primarily a theological and historical discussion. The methodology is similar to that of Avery Dulles in his books, Models of the Church and Models of Revelation. Like Dulles, I find models a useful methodology in clarifying theological issues.

Jesus spoke of the "mystery" or "secrets" of the Kingdom and gave us a number of Kingdom parables. In a sense these parables are models of the Kingdom. Using models is a more formal way of elaborating various images of God's sovereign rule over all things.

It is well to keep two points in mind in any discussion of models. First, each one is "ideal" or "synthetic" in the sense that its "pure" form may not actually be found in history. A model is to some degree an intentional abstraction from reality in order to clarify issues. Secondly, models are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Different models may balance or supplement each other. On the other hand, some pairs of models are virtually opposities so that to embrace one usually means rejecting the other. We may think of models as placed along a continuum, or perhaps multi-dimensional continua, with some models more complementary and others more in conflict with their opposites. This paper, however, is an

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attempt to be comprehensive - that is, to include all possible models of the Kingdom. It suggests a framework which at least in theory can embrace the range of possible conceptions of God's reign.

KINGDOM POLARITIES

As Jesus himself suggested, the Kingdom of God is a "mystery" in several senses. Models may reveal the mystery. The mysterious nature of the Kingdom is evident in Jesus' teaching and throughout Scripture. For example, Scripture speaks of the Kingdom as both present and future. In fact, this is one of at least six points of tension in the biblical material concerning God's reign. Understanding the Kingdom biblically begins with recognizing these polarities. We may identify these as follows:

- L. Present version future.
- 2. Individual versus social
- 3. Spirit versus matter
- 4. Gradual version climactic
- Divine action verses human action
- The Church's relation to the Kingdom

Any biblical theology of the Kingdom will need to westle with these polarities. In fact, I would offer the following thesis: theologies of the Kingdom which dissolve these tensions, opting whelly for one side or the other, are to that degree unbiblical. A biblically faithful and biblically useful theology of the Kingdom will in some way maintain and live with these polarities.

These six tension points may be illustrated as follows:

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