

MISSIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS OF DAVID HESSELGRAVE

Teaching “Kingdom of God” in Missionary Context

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The first thing that literally “jumps out” of the Sermon on the Mount is that the kingdom Jesus describes is profoundly different from any earthly kingdom.

In addition, as God’s Son, the Lord Jesus was an absolutely unique “apostle” or missionary (cf. Heb. 3:1). He was the only missionary in the history of the world who could both describe and offer God’s Kingdom to the people to whom he was sent. The rest of us whom God calls to be missionaries can offer Christ and his *gospel*. But, obviously, we cannot offer his *Kingdom* as such.

At the same time, as part of the “gospel” in the larger sense of that word, missionaries can and must teach the text before us (and other “kingdom texts”) as to its meaning and significance. After all, Jesus commanded us to “make disciples...teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20).

That may sound easy, but I invite readers to look at Matthew 5:40-42, for example, and imagine how they would teach this text to first-time hearers, many of whom would delight in nothing more than having the missionary’s “tunic,” a “two-mile ride” and some extra money. At first this sounds humorous, but in poverty-stricken situations it can be both serious and heart-rending.

I would suggest that certain “textual keys” are important to the proper treatment of these texts in missionary situations especially.

First of all, in the chapter that precedes the Sermon on the Mount note that Jesus was tempted by Satan. In one of those temptations, Satan showed Jesus the greatness and glory of earthly kingdoms and offered them to him if he would simply bow down and worship Satan (Matt. 4:9). Now that was a *bona fide* offer. Satan actually is the “god of this world” (II Cor. 4:4). In a profound sense, we live in Satan’s world, not God’s.

Second, the kingdom of God is an ideal kingdom. It’s principles are abiding principles to be sure. For example, the love of money is evil and idolatrous (Matt. 6:24). At the same time, the kingdom has not yet come to earth. Pragmatically, its provisions cannot always be carried out until that kingdom comes in all its fulness.

When we first moved close by a racecourse in Japan, many gamblers who lost everything started to come to us asking for money. We soon learned that we could not give to all of them. When Japanese Christians were properly instructed, they better understood both our dilemma and the nature of the kingdom.

Third, until the divine kingdom does come, the church of Jesus Christ is designed to be the earthly expression of what that kingdom is like. We live and minister in the “Church Age.” As the late and eminent Carl F. H. Henry writes: “The closest approximation of the Kingdom of God today is the Church, the body of regenerate believers that owns the crucified and risen Redeemer as its Head” (*The God Who Shows Himself* (Word).

That’s one reason why it is of the essence that missionaries and national pastors teach new converts to observe all Christ has commanded. Both they and the churches of which they are a part are to demonstrate what the Kingdom of God is like. At the same time they are to continue to pray that God’s Kingdom will come in all its fullness and that God’s will will be done on earth as it is in heaven!