

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

WEEK 15: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EARTHLY KINGDOM

When preparing the NT stages of Route 66 I had originally thought about separating the epistles according to authorship. Almost immediately, I realised not only would this take up more time, but also could be counter-productive. If the overarching theme of the NT is the realisation of the concept of the kingdom of God, then it is much more important to outline how all these epistles show us how the will of God came to be done on earth as it was in heaven. Since 13 of these epistles are attributed to Paul, it is obvious that they will provide more details and explanations of how that came about. Yet the epistles of Peter, James, John and Jude, plus that of the unknown writer to the Hebrews are equally important. That is because the one thing all the letters have in common is that, with the exception of those of John and possibly, Jude, they were being written at a time when their audiences did not have access to the gospels. John Ziesler states categorically “the earliest gospel was written after the latest of Paul’s letters” (p1). Because the narratives of Jesus’ earthly ministry were still at the stage of oral transmission, these letters only give us the indications of how that information had spread to the various communities, and the issues and problems arising from whatever teaching they had received. Depending on what had been transmitted, it is therefore understandable that many of the key elements of the coming of the kingdom on earth had to be clarified and explained in more detail.

We also have to bear in mind that they were addressed to three very different ancient cultures – Jew, Greek and Roman – which had already established diverse ethnic, national, religious and social norms in their various societies. When the extensive geographical area these letters reached from large urban centres like Jerusalem, Ephesus and Rome to rural and seaside towns and islands is taken into account, it is also understandable why the situations, issues and problems differed from community to community, and each of the writers’ replies had to address those specific circumstances, which may or may not have been relevant in other places. We should also include the time factor. There is some consensus that the earliest letter was that of James around AD45. The earliest of Paul’s letters was to the Thessalonians around AD51-52 while the last was no later than AD66-68. The last date of Peter’s letters was also in the AD60s because both Paul and Peter suffered martyrdom during the Neronian persecution in that decade.

Once all of these things about the epistles are taken into consideration, it then has to be emphasised that the epistles are pastoral in function and nature. They are intended to address the immediate issues and problems facing the communities who had brought these matters to the writers’ attention. They replied to explain, guide, direct, rebuke or accuse of wrongdoing, as necessary, in order that the kingdom might develop according to the will of God in that particular locality. They had no idea at the time of writing, that their replies would be woven together to form the theology and doctrines of the Christian church in the centuries and millennia that followed. All these caveats show us that the context of these letters need special attention because the issues and problems arising in each of the communities and people the letters reached is so diverse. That is why we need to distinguish between what is still absolutely essential for our understanding of the faith and practice in kingdom of God today, and those ancient contexts, traditions and personal preferences which no longer exist and, even if they did, would ultimately have no bearing on whether or not we were citizens of the kingdom of God on earth. In fact, it is Peter (2 Peter 3:16) who warns his audience that even some things Paul says are hard to understand and are already been distorted by people who are interpreting them to suit their own agendas. The cartoon gives a humorous example of taking words out of context. Yet, it illustrates what was already happening in the early church. It makes a very serious point, because all of the circumstances surrounding any part of the Bible

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

has to be interpreted only in the context of the Bible writer's intention and purpose, the teaching of the Bible as a whole; and taking into account the geographical, historical and cultural background of both the writer and his audience.

Once we are sure of the function and nature of these books, we can start to determine what can we be absolutely sure about in relation to the kingdom of God on earth. We can be sure, for a start, that the information the writers provided taught about its government, the status and non-negotiable tenets of the faith of the kingdom, and the conduct in attitudes and behaviour which gave tangible proof that the will of God was being done on earth. Taken together, these three elements established the basis upon which the kingdom was established and which governed its future growth and development. They are also the most important landmarks on this epistle stage of Route 66.

Colossians 1:13-14 (NIV) For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

1 Corinthians 15:24-28 (NIV) Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For he "has put everything under his feet." Now when it says that "everything" has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. 28 When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

We saw in Hebrews that as a result of Jesus' resurrection, ascension and exaltation to the right hand of God, joint sovereignty was established in heaven. That raises the question of how that sovereignty is to be exercised in the kingdom on earth. Both the verses in Colossians and Corinthians makes clear that it is God who still retains overall sovereignty. He is still the source and goal of all that the concept of the kingdom of God represents, for this is what His plans and purposes, revealed from the moment of creation, were leading to. This is what the prophetic Day of the Lord envisaged. The day when God would save and restore His creation and His people for all eternity. It is God's kingdom and Paul presents it as God's new dominion, replacing the powers under which humanity has been enslaved since the Fall. Jesus' proclamation of the coming of the kingdom was, for Paul, the power of God at work in the world. Yet, for an earthly kingdom to come into being, a means had to be found to prepare His human creation for entry into that eternal kingdom. That means was provided by God by sending Jesus into the world to die for the atonement of humanity's sin. Hence, acceptance of all that the Christ event achieved for the salvation of humanity was to be the means by which people became citizens of the earthly kingdom.

As a result of the Christ event, two kingdoms now exist on earth, the kingdom of darkness ruled by Satan and the kingdom of light ruled by Christ. All peoples are citizens of one or the other. But for the purpose of developing a kingdom on earth, all authority is vested in Jesus, simply because it is only in and through Him that redemption and forgiveness of sin is made possible. This demarcation of sovereignty is explained more fully in 1 Corinthians 15. It makes clear that God has delegated sovereign authority over the earthly kingdom to Jesus. Jesus, in other words, is acting as His Regent. A very important point in these verses is that they come in the context of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Jesus' resurrection destroyed Satan's power over death, but until the earthly kingdom comes to an end, physical

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

death will still a fact of life. Jesus' own resurrection was God's signal to the world that the foundation of the final resurrection of dead believers was now a guaranteed reality. Those who have accepted the authority of Jesus in this life are those who will be resurrected when the earthly kingdom is no more. Once God deems that kingdom has reached its intended goal, according to His will and purpose, the kingdoms of earth and heaven will become one eternal kingdom under God, because the manifestation of people raised from the dead to eternal life will be the climax of Jesus' victory over all the other powers opposed to God.

Until that happens, however, the present guarantee of the resurrection of dead believers means that the kingdom on earth is already established on eternal principles. That being so, we need to see how Christ's authority operates in the lives of the citizens of His kingdom. This is explained in various ways. One of the most graphic is the imagery of believers being in the body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:27 (NIV) Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Colossians 1:18 (NIV) And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

Colossians 2:19 (NIV) They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

The description of Jesus as the head of the body, which Paul regards as the church, is very apt, because what is in the head controls the rest of the body. There is a great debate among scholars as to whether or not the kingdom of God is identical to what we now recognise as the church. If, however, we see the kingdom in terms of individuals, assemblies and communities as having accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, and manifesting that in the way they live their lives, then that gives us a more accurate definition of the kingdom of God on earth. In short, it exists where these two conditions exist, because these are the summary of what constitutes God's will being done on earth. In contrast Paul roundly condemns the addition of any human rules or traditions which lead to losing connection with the Head. The text in Colossians 2:19 refers to those within the community who have 'unspiritual minds' who have introduced rules about eating and drinking, attributing spiritual significance to special days which should be followed by believers; and even introducing the worship of angels. Because these kinds of non-essential and even damaging ideas were being foisted on believers in Paul's day, as already mentioned, we need to be very careful to distinguish between what keeps us connected to the will of God and the example of Christ, in order not to create schisms, divisions and discord in the rest of the body.

Paul also gives us a more mystical view of divine government in his major theme of 'union with Christ'.

Colossians 1:17 & 19 He is before ALL things, and IN HIM ALL things hold together.For God was pleased to have ALL his fullness dwell IN HIM, AND THROUGH HIM to reconcile to himself ALL things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

Galatians 2:20-21 (NIV) I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

It is this teaching that confirms the centrality of Jesus in the government of the earthly kingdom because if we have not entered into union with Christ through what He achieved through His death, burial and resurrection, then we cannot claim to be citizens of His kingdom. This is the working out of our acceptance of His offer of salvation and recognition of Him as the ultimate authority governing our spiritual and physical existence in this world. In Paul's words to the Galatians, union with Christ is state of being that has to be lived. To him it was the bedrock of everything to do with salvation. From Colossians we learn that ALL things in heaven and earth find their centre in the Person and work of Christ. In and through Christ is the only means by which the reconciliation to God that establishes the spiritual peace between heaven and earth, can happen. And that can only happen when the union with Christ makes us a new creation, which submits to the will of God to be conformed to the likeness of His Son.

And that brings us to the third element in the government of God's kingdom on earth – the presence of the Holy Spirit, which is the power of Christ at work in the individual believer.

Ephesians 1:13-14 (NIV) And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

1 Thessalonians 5:19 (NIV) Do not quench the Spirit.

1 Peter 1:1-2 (NIV) To God's elect,2 who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood:

1 John 4:4 (NIV) You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.

All who are in Christ have been given the gift of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. He has the responsibility of empowering, teaching, guiding believers to carry out the will of God and of Christ on earth. In the Pauline epistles it is the Holy Spirit who makes it possible not only for a person to have a relationship with God but also to live in accord with God's will as it is set forth in the New Testament. Peter agrees that only Holy Spirit enablement makes obedient submission to God's will possible. Yet, like citizens of worldly regimes, we have the option to obey the laws or disobey them. We have the same option in the kingdom of God on earth. That is why Paul tells the Thessalonians not to quench the Spirit. Believers who ignore the prompting of the Spirit when they decide to engage in something they know is not God's will or Christlike in nature, are contributing to the vast majority of non-believers, who either passively reject divine authority by denying the very existence of God, or actively seek to prevent God's will being done on earth. Believers have no excuse as John states. The Holy Spirit is all powerful and with a willing subject, can overcome everything that opposes God's sovereign authority both within and without the church communities.

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

Having established the way divine sovereignty is exercised in the kingdom on earth, our next landmark takes us to what that sovereignty has conferred upon the citizens of the kingdom.

1 John 3:1 (NIV) See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

Philippians 4:19 (NIV) And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:15-17 (NIV)the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. 17 Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

1 Peter 1:3-4 (NIV) Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you,

When you think of it the word ‘citizen’ or ‘subject’ has a cold, impersonal feel about it. In most countries there is a disconnection between the ruling elites and the mass of ordinary people. In God’s earthly kingdom, as these verses show, the complete opposite is true. God loves the humanity He created and proved it by sending His beloved Son to die to save them. But He has reserved love beyond measure to be poured out on those who have accepted His Son as their Lord and Saviour. As such, they don’t just become any other citizen, but become a child of God – a loving, warm and personal relationship immediately comes into being. In effect, the status of an anonymous citizen transformed into being a member of a family where the Head of that family knows and loves each child equally. And, it is personal, because God knows every single thing about every individual. He is personally committed through Christ and the Holy Spirit to supply the needs of every child of His. Such is the closeness of the relationship He desires that the Almighty sovereign God of the universe allows those in His kingdom to address Him by the intimate name of ‘Father’. As a further indication of the family relationship, each child has been given an equal inheritance being kept for him/her when God’s final kingdom will be brought into being.

That relationship status was achieved for us by Christ’s death and resurrection. Faith in Jesus, altered our spiritual status before God.

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV) For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

Romans 6:18 (NIV) You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

Romans 8:18-23 (NIV) I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.... in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God..... Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit,

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.

Justification saves us from the penalty of sin because a righteous God has conferred the righteousness of His Son on us, hence we no longer face the condemnation that deserves punishment. As Ephesians 2:2-9 tells us, we have been saved by grace, through faith in Jesus. Justification is a gift of God. That is our present spiritual status, but it is only the beginning of our spiritual journey. If God's will is to be done on earth as it is in heaven, it is our responsibility, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to first make sure it is being done in our own lives; and secondly, to do what we can so that it can be done in other lives and in whatever situation God places us. That is what sanctification is about. As Paul states in Romans 6, our justification, that being set free from bearing the penalty for our sin, makes us now 'slaves to righteousness. As Ephesians 2:10 states: **For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

But as if those aspects of status were not enough, the combined family and spiritual standing confers upon us collectively a very high status in God's estimation.

1 Peter 2:9-10 (NIV) But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

These words of Peter take us back to the words used by Moses in Deuteronomy 7:6 and 14:2, when God chose the children of Israel to be His treasured possession. In verse 2 Peter 2:10 Peter asserts we are the people of God whom He regards as chosen, royal, holy and special. Here, too, we have the echo of the assertion of the words of Colossians 1:13-14 that we have been rescued from the realm of darkness and relocated in the light of God's kingdom. And our praise for this elevation in status, declared by God Himself, should be directed to Jesus, who quite literally, came from the top to the bottom, so that we could go from the bottom to the top.

In these epistles, therefore, our status is established in ways that promote confidence in the 'living hope' for future glorification when we inherit what has been promised to us. Until that becomes a reality, however, we need to take our responsibilities for our progress in sanctification seriously, a matter which brings us to our final landmark on this penultimate stage of our route. First, a word of warning. While the epistles provide all we need to know to show us the way to proceed towards sanctification, God has been honest enough with us to warn us that it will not always be easy. We have seen from the very beginning of Route 66 that an inveterate enemy of God has existed and his sole purpose is to pervert, corrupt and destroy everything God has created. The kingdom of God on earth is now Satan's special target. All God's children will face at one time or another attacks from this quarter, some of which will be fatal. Hence the need to persevere, to press on towards the goal of eventual glorification. The good news is that we do not do this in our own strength. God is not just at work behind us, but in us. In Ephesians 1:19-20 we are told that He is exerting in us the same mighty strength he exerted when He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms. It is only confidence in that power and the truth of its claim that enables us to promote the ethos of God's kingdom on earth.

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

Galatians 5:22-23 (NIV) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

2 Peter 1:3 (NIV) His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

2 Peter 3:18 (NIV) But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.

2 Peter 1:5-8 (NIV) For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Peter 1:3 echoes that assertion in Ephesians stating that it is God's divine power which has given us all we need to live a godly life. In 2 Peter 3:18 the exhortation is to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. In effect, both of these statements take us almost full circle. For God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, we need the knowledge of all that God has revealed to us through His word. In Peter's methodology, conviction involves investing our faith in Paul's words to Timothy that all Scripture is inspired by God and all of it is relevant at all times and in all places. We cannot strive for the excellence of virtue until we see the virtue revealed in those Scriptures of the personal attributes and expectations of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is only from our knowledge and understanding of what divine virtue consists of that we can proceed to emulate it through self-control, perseverance and the God/Christ likeness that leads to the ultimate virtue of love for God and for all other peoples. And, no, I haven't forgotten that the fruit of the Spirit is also necessary to enable God's will to be done on earth. It is only as His children cultivate and strive to attain these personal virtues and exercise them in their daily lives, that the kingdom of God will be seen to be present on earth.

Finally, if God's children are to influence the world's system with the culture of heaven, 1 Peter 1:21- 2:1-3 leave us with some important points mentioned in various places throughout the epistles.

1 Peter 1:21 - 2:3 (NIV) Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God. 22 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. 23 For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. 24 For, "All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, 25 but the word of the Lord endures forever." And this is the word that was preached to you. 1 Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. 2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, 3 now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

1 Peter 1:21-25 - 2:1-3 (NIV)

O The word of God is truth, endures forever.

O Eternal life comes through faith and hope in that living and enduring word.

ROUTE 66: THE CHRISTIAN WAY

- O Faith and hope in God who raised Christ from the dead
- O Crave the pure milk of the word so that you can grow in salvation
- O Grow by getting rid of malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.
- O Grow by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart
- O TASTE AND SEE THAT THE LORD IS GOOD

Influencing the world's systems by the culture of heaven is simply another way of saying 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The epistles assure us that the kingdom of God already exists on earth. God's will is already being done on earth through the reign of Christ in the church and by the power of the Holy Spirit. The rescued, redeemed, regenerated and justified children of God are pursuing sanctification, encouraged to persevere in the living hope of glorification.

And the epistles also assure us that that too is a certainty when Christ returns to defeat Satan and claim His kingdom in order to unite it with the kingdom of God in heaven.