

How Does Bethel Get 'The Kingdom' Wrong?

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*"The sufferings of Jesus were realised in the persecution He endured and in the burden He carried for people. He did not suffer with disease. That must be removed from our idea of Christian suffering. It is vain to carry something under the guise of the will of God when it is something that He purchased that He might destroy its power over us. An additional concept to remember is that **He suffered that we might not have to suffer**. For example, He bore stripes on His body applied by a Roman soldier so that they could become His payment for our healing.*

If this suffering of His was insufficient, then what did it accomplish? This error, if carried through, brings the whole issue of conversion and forgiveness of sins into question. It's true that the sufferings of Jesus are not yet complete, but they have to do with our call to righteous living in an unrighteous world. This brings pressure upon our lives that range from the realm of persecution for living for Christ to the burdens we bear as intercessors before our Heavenly Father where we plead the case of the lost.

When we allow sickness, torment, and poverty to be thought of as the God-ordained tools He uses to make us more like Jesus, we have participated in a very shameful act. There is no doubt He can use them, as He is also known to be able to use the devil himself for His purposes. (He can win with a pair of twos.) But to think these things are released into our lives through His design, or that He approved such things, is to undermine the work at Calvary. To do so one must completely disregard the life of Christ and the purpose of the cross. None of us would say that He died for my sins but still intends that I should be bound by sin habits. Neither did He pay for my healing and deliverance so I could continue in torment and disease. His provision for such things is not figurative: it is actual. Furthermore, it dishonours the Lord to disregard His work in order to justify our difficulty to believe for the impossible. It is time to own up to the nature of the gospel and preach it for what it is. ***It is the answer for every dilemma, conflict, and affliction on the planet.*** Declare it with boldness, and watch Him invade Earth once again." [Bill Johnson, Face to face with God]

Introduction

We should regard Bill Johnson and his fellow Bible teachers at Bethel as brothers in Christ; there is plenty of evidence that they have a genuine love for Jesus. While this remains true, Bethel's teaching on the Kingdom is a unique interpretation of what the Gospel message is essentially about and this should give us pause for investigation. According to Bill Johnson, the Gospel is "the answer for every dilemma, conflict, and affliction on the planet." It is a persistent refrain of his that the task of the Christian is to be the vehicle through which "heaven invades earth". Therefore, everything which we experience on earth which is not compatible with the reality in heaven should not be tolerated by Christians.

I will attempt to show that while some of this teaching has a basis in truth, if it is removed from the rest of Jesus' teaching and emphasised to the neglect of other important attributes of the Kingdom, it will ultimately produce unhealthy Christians.

So what did Jesus mean when He taught us to pray the words, *"Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"*? Johnson interprets this to mean that we as believers must pull heaven down to this earth, by faith. According to the thinking, we as believers usher in the Kingdom by working miracles and destroying the works of the evil one so that *we can make a kind of heaven here*. Is this what Jesus had in mind? In this article, I will unpack how Bethel's understanding of the Kingdom can impact upon the way in which we understand: the Gospel, salvation, the end times, suffering, and the apostolic lifestyle.[\[1\]](#)

Heaven on Earth

In his book *How Heaven Invades Earth*, Kris Vallotton[\[2\]](#) explains how he thinks this should look in practice. The picture that he paints begins to look very strange and confusing. He quotes extensively from Old Testament prophecy and begins to apply it all incorrectly to our present-day and age. Let me give an example. He quotes Isaiah 2:2-4:

"Now it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways and that we may walk in His paths.' For the law will go forth from Zion and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations, and will render decisions for many peoples; and they will hammer their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war".

He goes on to offer this commentary on the passage:

"Meditate on those verses for a while and they will make you happy! Nations are no longer going to be at war with each other because they are going to come to the house of the Lord and learn God's ways. Could this result, for example, in nations remodelling their weapons plants into factories that generate fresh produce to feed the world? It totally makes sense when you compare Isaiah's prophecy with the commission that Jesus gave us to make disciples of all nations and then teach them everything He taught us (see Matthew 28: 19-20). This could be one of the ways that we are to be a blessing to all the countries in the world."[\[3\]](#)

I think we would all agree that meditating on the wonders of the new heaven and the new

earth *does* produce a deep sense of satisfaction and joy. But what is rather startling is that Vallotton has in mind the present earth, here and now, before Jesus returns! He goes on to quote passage after passage from Old Testament prophecy and apply it to the here and now so that the following picture begins to emerge:

The church on earth will:

- Judge between the nations, and will render decisions for many peoples.
- The nations will hammer their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.
- Nation will no longer lift up sword against nation, and never again will they learn war.
- There will be no end to the increase of Jesus' government or of peace.
- Cities and nations will be rebuilt.
- We will see the restoration of all things.
- The abundance of the sea will be turned over to the Christians.
- Nations, kings and people will come to us from around the world to be healed, saved, delivered and transformed.
- In exchange for these services – the wealth of the nations will come to us.
- *Evil will not increase in the end times but instead, it will be destroyed.*^[4]

And all of this will be achieved *before* Jesus returns to judge and reign over the world!

As we read this description of “how heaven invades earth” there are a number of objections that spring to mind. Most importantly, this interpretation of messianic prophecy conflicts radically with what Jesus Himself taught us about the end times!^[5] In some ways this knock-on effect was inevitable. Vallotton makes this quote when describing their doctrinal shift,

“Jack Taylor put it this way: ‘It’s hard to give people heaven by the half acre while believing that things are going to hell in a hand basket.’”^[6]

Furthermore, he says, *“If we are to pray that it would be on earth as it is in heaven, and if we are commissioned to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19), then doesn’t it stand to reason that we need a new approach to the end times?”*^[7]

Let us revisit the prayer which seems to be at the source of much of this confusion, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Should we not interpret this Scripture much more simply? Are we really asking God to make it heavenly on earth? In the life of Jesus we see Him ministering the grace of God to many people, but even in *His* life can we honestly say that He made a heaven on earth in those places where He ministered? There was deep repentance, healing and miracles to be sure, but it certainly was not the end of all suffering for those towns.

This brings me to another objection. Our future with Jesus in heaven is the “joy set before us”. The whole point of heaven is that it is fundamentally *different* to earth. The promise that we cling to is that if we serve Jesus faithfully in this life, we will receive an inheritance from Him, we will be freed from all the trials and the pain which are our daily reality. It will never be like heaven on earth. A brief history lesson will make this point clear. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, God cursed them and cursed the earth where we still live. As a result of the curse, God said that ever thereafter: work would be burdensome, child-birth would be painful, and death would be inevitable.

Even since the reconciliation that Jesus achieved for us on the cross, we *still* experience the effects of that curse, even as believers. This curse notwithstanding, we still suffer from the consequences of: our own sins, the sins of others, and the sins of satan directed against us. No amount of miracles

is going to make a heaven on earth. Not only so, but Jesus made it expressly clear that this should *not* be our expectation of a life following Him. He said, *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33)

Jesus wanted to save us from any false expectations of what it would be like in His service. He said we should count the cost before choosing to follow Him, considering the fact that it would be a more difficult path to follow. To teach Christians a 'bubble-wrapped' version of the Gospel will not profit them well when they are required to persevere through hardships.

Suffering

It is simply not true that, "[Jesus] suffered that we might not have to suffer". It is closer to the truth that *because* he suffered *we can* expect to suffer. Jesus taught us that there is a redemptive work that is done in us through suffering. So let's get a Biblical perspective on this:

*"Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for **whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin**, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer... Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good."* 1 Peter 4:1

It says in Romans 5:3-5:

*"And not only this, **but we also exult in our tribulations**, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."*

There is a consistent theme throughout the New Testament that the path that Jesus walked was suffering, weakness and humiliation and as His reward from the Father – glorification. We as the younger siblings of the First Born Son have a similar journey to walk:

*"The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, **provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.**"* Romans 8:16,17

And again,

*"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, **he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death**, even death on a cross. **Therefore God has highly exalted him** and bestowed on him the name that is above every name"* Philippians 2:5-9

The purpose of the Gospel is not primarily to rid the world of suffering (although that will be the end result). Its purpose is to reconcile us with God, to liberate us from the power of sin and make us ready for eternity with Him. I think it is this aspect of the Gospel that the Bethelites have got very wrong. It is a subtle shift in emphasis but it can make a world of difference. A person's thinking in this regard will become more obvious in his ministry to those who are not yet believers.

If our mission on earth is to rid the world of suffering then I will busy myself with healing the sick,

feeding the poor and making every effort to make things as comfortable and as pleasant as possible for all humanity. But if my focus is on eternity then my most important mission is my *"ministry of reconciliation"* (2 Corinthians 5:18). Our primary responsibility is to warn and prepare those who are lost for the second coming of Christ by reconciling them to the Father through the Gospel. It is true that both Paul and Jesus worked many miracles, but it was not with the intention of eradicating suffering on earth but rather to demonstrate the Kingdom which they spent so much time proclaiming.

Jesus came to destroy the works of Satan and bring healing to mankind and so He addressed the problem at its root. The root is rebellion towards God, so that is where He began His most urgent healing work. By His death on the cross, He made it possible that we could be reconciled with God. He is redeeming fallen humanity by *"the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit"* (Titus 3:5). As reconciled children of God, we begin to experience the first fruits of the coming Kingdom, the one in which the reign of Christ will be fully realised.

Jesus is making all things new and He has started the renewal process in us. Before He can populate the new earth He first needs a Kingdom of people who have been born again, a people who have prepared themselves, who have washed their robes clean in His blood, who have anointed themselves with the oil of His Spirit.

In Between the Times

It is true that Jesus will put an end to all suffering. It is also true that the Gospel *"is the answer for every dilemma, conflict, and affliction on the planet"*, but when can we expect perfect peace on earth? It will be at His second coming when He vanquishes all evil and judges the wicked. It is at that time when sin itself will be vanquished forever so that even the temptation to sin will be gone. Christ will complete the work which He has begun in us and we will achieve moral perfection for *"when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."* (1 John 3:2) So we find ourselves in between. Humanity witnessed Christ's definitive triumph over Satan at the cross, and now we work and wait with Christ who at that time *"sat down at the right hand of God, **waiting from that time onward until his enemies be made a footstool for his feet.**"* (Hebrews 10:13,14)

It is crucial in our ministry of the Gospel that we recognise the times in which we are in. Jesus is intentionally delaying His second return out of kindness and patience towards those who have not yet reconciled with Him (2 Peter 3:9). It is our urgent duty to use whatever means that is at our disposal to make people ready for Christ's imminent return. We do the people in this world the greatest disservice if we see to their temporary needs but neglect their most urgent need of all, which is to be reconciled to the Father.

It is not the intention of this article to be a kill-joy and argue that we cannot enjoy *any* of the benefits of the future Kingdom now (like healing, provision, etc). Rather, my intention is to correct a false doctrine which says that we can have *all* the benefits now. There is much which we still look forward to and wait for (and even speed up) – the things which will be fulfilled at Jesus' glorious second coming.

An Apostolic Lifestyle

Paul's life was a graphic demonstration of his own words, that *"we have this treasure in jars of clay, **to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.**"* (2 Corinthians 4:7)

The “treasure” is the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”. Not only was the power of God demonstrated in the signs that accompanied the Gospel which Paul preached, it was the same power that sustained him. The picture which he uses to describe himself is that of a fragile clay pot. He was very aware of his own weakness, not as a display of false modesty but as a daily reality. He goes on to say,

“We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.”

For every trial that he endured, the grace of God was also present to sustain him.

Paul had one of the most tumultuous lives that I know of, and this is the way that he made sense of it all,

*“For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. **But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God**, who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us.”* 1 Corinthians 1:8-10

According to Johnson, Jesus “suffered that we might not have to suffer”. In saying this he clearly did not have the apostolic lifestyle of Paul in mind. Paul was not ashamed of the suffering that he endured while following Christ, *as though the Gospel had somehow failed*. Rather he boasts of them and even lists them in the defence of his ministry:

*“Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. **Three times I was shipwrecked**; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, **in danger from rivers, danger from robbers**, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, **through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.**”* 2 Corinthians 11:23-27

Paul does not divide up the “spiritual” suffering of persecution for the Gospel from the kind of everyday trials and fears that we still face: shipwreck [car break down?], danger from rivers, danger from robbers, sleepless nights, etc. Johnson is incorrect in allowing for some suffering because it is spiritual and disallows the possibility of others because they are natural. And what about sickness? Did Paul suffer from sickness like the rest of us? Yes, he did, as he describes here,

*“As you know, **it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you**. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself.”* Galatians 4:13-14

Sickness was a trial that Paul and his whole team were subjected to at various times and it is wrong to blast him or anyone else for their lack of faith in this,

“that suffering and pain stem from evil is not to be doubted; that they are the direct result of our own evil – or lack of faith, as some would have it – is not only to be doubted but to be vigorously rejected as completely foreign to Paul. The result of this view is something of an over-realized

eschatological perspective, emphasizing the already to the neglect of the not yet, resulting in an un-Pauline view of the Spirit as present in power while negating weakness in the present as dishonoring to God”[8]

Far from being ashamed of his sufferings Paul says, “*If I must boast, **I will boast of the things that show my weakness.***” (2 Corinthians 11:30) So we need not feel ashamed of our weaknesses either, rather let us consider our trials and travails, and the weaknesses they reveal in us as yet another opportunity for the glory of God to be revealed in our lives.

When the disciples asked Jesus about a man born blind they said, “*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?*” Jesus answered, “*It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but **it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.***” (John 9:2,3) Is our understanding of God big enough to allow for this? That He be glorified in our trials *and* in our victories? I hope so.

Healing in the Kingdom

We find that God ordains in advance the good works that He has for us to do, and He equips us for the task. He sustains our mortal bodies to go the distance and He has made provision for our healing within the church. To some, He has given gifts of healing to minister to saints who are ill. In James 5 we learn that God has given authority to elders in the local church to pray for the sick and heal them. There is also the more general form of prayer from every believer which God will hear and respond to. In the Word and in practice we find that God ministers health to us using these vehicles of grace.

Ultimately though, we are delaying the inevitable. The Bible says “*flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable... **For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.***” (1 Corinthians 15:50,53) This has a profound impact on our perception of things. We can’t afford to live for what is temporary, as Paul goes on to say,

“*So we do not lose heart. **Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.** For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as **we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.** For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” 2 Corinthians 4:16-18*

God is preparing a people for His Eternal Kingdom which is presided over by the King of Righteousness. Are we willing to endure, persevere and submit ourselves to the processes of God, as painful as they may be, for our sanctification and the advancement of His Kingdom? Are we willing to live an apostolic lifestyle in which we witness the awe-inspiring power of God in our own lives and in the lives of others but which will often come at great personal cost and often when we are at our weakest?

The Temporal and the Eternal

The question is – if our focus is on rebuilding cities, healing people’s bodies and working for world peace, are we not falling into the trap that the New Testament warns us about so frequently? Instead of living with the hope of eternity in our minds, we begin to make a much bigger deal of our present circumstances on earth.

So we find a shift in emphasis *from what is unseen and eternal to what is seen and temporary*. Instead of valuing *the renewal which is happening on the inside*, we fret about the *external which is wasting away*. We know that God does care about our bodies but He cares even more about holiness. Sometimes He will make us wait longer than we are comfortable for deliverance from our external afflictions because they are producing the character in us which make us fit for the new earth where Righteousness dwells.

If we are promising “heaven by the half-acre” this side of eternity then we need to seriously re-evaluate what Gospel we are preaching because we are making promises that Jesus did not. A Christian born into a culture where miracles trump character will not appreciate the redemptive nature of suffering. Instead, he will find it abnormal and irritating rather than instrumental in forming holiness.

Believing for the Impossible

I agree with Johnson that, *“it dishonours the Lord to disregard His work in order to justify our difficulty to believe for the impossible”*. We have a natural tendency as followers of Christ to slide to what is possible and attainable in our own abilities rather than to what is achievable only by the power of the Spirit. We need to continue to contend for the miraculous interventions of God in our lives and guard against any theology or attitude which precludes the power of God from our ministry. At the same time, we dare not formulate any doctrine which highlights certain aspects of the Kingdom which are triumphalistic to the neglect of other equally important aspects of the Kingdom which require perseverance and sacrifice from us.

What saddens me all the more is that there are many who reckon the miracles that are performed at Bethel to be a confirmation of the doctrine which they teach, as if to say “if it works it must be right”. The sobering truth is that if we make a ministry of signs and wonders the goal of our lives then we have already forfeited our inheritance in Christ (Matthew 7:22).

Conclusion

A correct understanding of how the Kingdom of God will be consummated fills us with fresh enthusiasm for the task that we have at hand and gives us strength to persevere. Just as John the Baptist prepared the nation of Israel and pointed them to the coming Christ, we have the awesome responsibility to be the fore-runners, the first-fruits of the returning and glorified King of Heaven who is about to make his eternal home with us! To this end, we offer up our lives as living sacrifices.

We are the brightest lights in a world that is growing steadily darker until the new day dawns and the Son shines down in all his brilliance. We carry this treasure in jars of clay, testifying all the while that the power does not come from ourselves but from Him who resurrects us and rescues us from every trial and affliction. This is the apostolic lifestyle that He has called us to. Do you dare?

Our lives represent the paradox of the Kingdom – we are citizens of a Heavenly Kingdom but living in an earthly one. We have been born again as eternal, spiritual beings but yet are outwardly wasting away. We have been made holy but yet we still do battle with sin. We experience resurrection power but are constantly given over to death. We are products of the Kingdom which we preach – the Kingdom which has come, the Kingdom which breaks into the here and now and the Kingdom which is still coming. The miracles that accompany us testify to this other Kingdom, this Kingdom which has triumphed over satan at the resurrection of Jesus and will ultimately

triumph in emphatic style when the King returns.

*This article was first published on 23 April 2019 on [Luke's Personal Blog](#).

References

- [1] This phrase refers to the lifestyle of a believer living out the great commission to "Go into all the world and make disciples."*
- [2] Kris Vallotton is a very influential teaching pastor on the team with Bill Johnson in Bethel church.*
- [3] Vallotton, Kris (2013-04-23). How Heaven Invades Earth: Transform the World Around You (pp. 200-201). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.*
- [4] This is a summary of Vallotton's conclusions from the prophetic passages in Isaiah.*
- [5] See Matthew 24*
- [6] Vallotton, Kris (2013-04-23). How Heaven Invades Earth: Transform the World Around You (p. 208). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.*
- [7] Vallotton, Kris (2013-04-23). How Heaven Invades Earth: Transform the World Around You (p. 207). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.*
- [8] Gordon Fee. Paul, the Spirit and the People of God. 142*