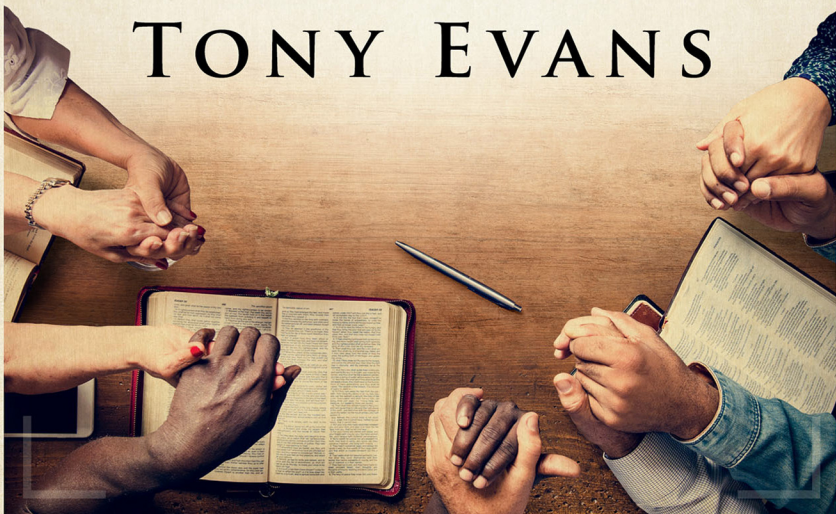


THE KINGDOM PASTOR'S LIBRARY

THE
CENTRALITY
of the
CHURCH

Practicing the Ways of God
with the People of God

TONY EVANS



THE KINGDOM

In most recognized countries in the world, there is an American embassy, which is like a little bit of America a long way from home. Embassies have special immunities and protections from local law enforcement; the host nation's law enforcement can only enter the embassy with the ambassador's permission. If you get into trouble in a hostile country, make your way to the American embassy. Because once you cross the gate and enter the realm of its dominion, you are under the protection of the embassy.

The church is supposed to be a little bit of heaven a long way from home. It is to be that place where the values of eternity operate in history. The church is a place where weary people can go to find truth, acceptance, equality, freedom, safety, joy, justice, and hope. It is to serve as a centralized role

in culture. Pastor, your job is not only to preach God's Word but also to administrate the critical operations of the church in such a way that your church fulfills its purpose in society.

Unfortunately today, far too many pastors lead their churches with a myopic view on the church's purpose. After all, how is it possible for the number of churches in our nation to be ever increasing while the impact of the church only wanes? How can we have so much preaching, praising, programs, and ministry resources and yet so little demonstrated power? Why does the church merely react to society's agenda rather than offering a kingdom agenda for its members, as well as for society, to embrace?

The answers to these questions lie in the reality that the church today bears little resemblance to the kingdom from which we came. This is because we have failed to function from a kingdom perspective. The church has stopped being the biblical church that it was designed to be, and as a result, we have limited our impact on contemporary society, both inside and outside our walls.

Throughout Scripture, God's agenda is His kingdom. The Greek word used for kingdom is *basileia*, which essentially means "rule" or "authority." A kingdom always includes three crucial components: First, a ruler empowered with sufficient authority; second, a realm of subjects who fall underneath this authority; and third, the rules of governance. God's kingdom

is *the authoritative execution of His comprehensive governance in all creation.*

Therefore, the universe we live in is a theocracy. *Theos* refers to God. *Ocracy* refers to rule. A kingdom perspective means that the rule of God (*theocracy*) trumps the rule of man (*homocracy*). Psalm 103:19 expresses it this way: “The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all” (NIV). Therefore, the kingdom agenda is *the visible manifestation of the comprehensive rule of God over every area of life.*

To understand your role as a pastor of a church and the church’s centrality in our culture, you have to first understand the kingdom from a biblical perspective.

God’s kingdom is larger than the temporal, political, and social realms in which we live. It’s not confined to the walls of the church in which we worship Him. The kingdom is both now (Mark 1:15) and not yet (Matt. 16:28). It is among us (Luke 17:21) but also in heaven (Matt. 7:21; 2 Tim. 4:18), since it originates from above, from another realm. Jesus revealed that truth shortly before His crucifixion, when He said in response to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm” (John 18:36). While God’s kingdom is in this world, it does not originate from this world.

Since it originates from another realm, God established covenants within the world we live through which to implement it. A covenant is *a divinely created relational bond through which God executes and administers His kingdom agenda*. These covenants are governmental systems or institutions designated as family, church, and civil government (state). God rules them all and each one is to be accountable to Him and His standards as their sovereign. Whether or not mankind functions in alignment with His rule is another story. Regardless, God has given the guidelines by which all three are to operate because He is the originator of all three. Failure to operate under His authority within those guidelines results in negative consequences.

The three, while distinct in their responsibilities and jurisdiction, are to cooperate with each other with the common goal of producing personal responsibility and individuals who govern themselves under God. None of these governing spheres is to be viewed or is to operate as an all-powerful and controlling authority over the others.

OPERATING UNDER GOD

The foundation on which all three institutional covenants operate is that of an absolute standard of truth. This standard of truth is nonnegotiable, non-adjustable, and transcends cultural, racial, and situational lines. Truth is fundamentally

God-based knowledge since God is both the originator and the author of truth.

Not only does the kingdom agenda operate on this foundation of truth, but it also operates under the only all-inclusive principle presented to us for understanding the work of God and His kingdom. This principle is His glory. Romans 11:36 says, “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Glory simply means “to be heavy” or “to have weight.” It denotes significance. Since all things come from God, are through God, and go to God, God’s glory exists intrinsically in Himself. Whether we ascribe glory to God or not is irrelevant to the amount of glory God has; His glory is already fully present in Him. However, we experience and access that glory when we place ourselves under His comprehensive rule. This is because it is then that God radiates and magnifies His glory to, in, and through us.

A primary position for bringing glory to God is that of surrender to His sovereignty. To surrender to God’s sovereignty is to acknowledge His jurisdiction, along with the validity of His supremacy, over every area of life. God is accountable to no one. He either causes all things to happen or He permits them to happen. Sovereignty means that God never says: “Oops, I missed that one.” When we lead our churches by the principles of the kingdom agenda, we experience God’s hand in every area of our church as well as

within our church members' lives and thereby witness His promise to work all things together for good (Rom. 8:28). As people are conformed to the image of Christ in their attitudes and actions, character and conduct begin to reflect Christ all the more.

However, what we often do is limit our opportunity to experience God working all things together for good by defining God according to our purpose rather than His. Humanism and socialism—whether it be in the form of modern-day church-ism, materialism, me-ism, statism, liberation theology, or Marxism—offers an insufficient understanding of the purpose, work, and revelation of God. It attempts to box God into a “kingdom” confined within the perspective of man. Yet, when the human condition is used as the starting point for seeing the whole of God's revelation, rather than a surrender to His sovereignty over the whole of the human condition, faulty theology and sociology emerge. What we wind up with is a God fashioned in the image of man.

A kingdom perspective does not view man's condition first and then assign to God what we feel would best reflect Him. Rather, a kingdom perspective ascertains how God has determined to glorify Himself comprehensively in the affairs of men and then aligns itself with that despite our inability to always understand God's processes. God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good. However, God's definition of good isn't always ours. In fact, God often uses the very thing that we

call “not good” as a tool to bring about an ultimate purpose, as well as the resultant manifestation of His greater glory.

For example, according to the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, slavery in Egypt was an intricate part of God’s program for the nation. We read, “God said to Abram, ‘Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions’” (Gen. 15:13–14).

The point here is that God, in accomplishing His kingdom agenda, allowed a negative reality that could have been avoided if He had chosen for it to be. Yet the reality of the Israelites’ slavery in Egypt accomplished a higher purpose of establishing God’s theocratic relationship with them based on an exodus that would serve as a constant reminder of who had brought them out (Ex. 12:42). This truth served as a foundational relational principle in the future movements of God with the Israelite community.

God’s sovereignty in the midst of what we do not understand is echoed elsewhere throughout the Bible. Another example is found in the life of Joseph who had been sold into slavery by his brothers. Joseph later said to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive” (Gen. 50:20).

The freedom that is actualized through a kingdom perspective, that of embracing God's sovereignty, generates a faith and ministry perspective more powerful than any human weapon or system of philosophy could ever produce. It accesses God's grace in such a way so as to grant a freedom that is not incumbent upon externals. This is the only true authentic freedom as it manifests God's ability to bring about good in any and every situation surrendered to Him.

While God is a God of liberation and justice—and while we should be about the same—a kingdom perspective recognizes that in His sovereignty, His timing is not always the same as our own. However, a kingdom theology also recognizes that while there remain oppression and injustice in the world's systems, they should never be tolerated within the church of God or among members within the body of Christ.

In fact, whenever Jesus proclaimed the “kingdom of God” during His earthly presence, He did so while simultaneously healing, helping, feeding, and freeing the hurting and the lost. Therefore, any pastor of any church who minimizes legitimate social needs has failed to model the church he leads after the One whom we have been given to follow, thereby reducing the glory his church gives to God as well as its impact in the world (Matt. 5:16).

While we may not always understand God's processes or His timing, a kingdom theology recognizes that God's purpose does not change, and that purpose is to glorify Himself. The

ultimate goal of the kingdom is always Godward. Therefore, living the kingdom agenda means that the comprehensive rule of God is the final, authoritative, and governing principle in our personal lives, family lives, churches, and communities in order that God may manifest His glory while advancing His kingdom.

THE SOCIOPOLITICAL DISTINCTION OF THE KINGDOM

The problem we face in the church today is that churches have misunderstood and undervalued the kingdom, thereby marginalizing its authority and influence not only in the lives of its members but also in our land. Many in the church have so spiritualized the kingdom that its sociopolitical rules have become little more than an ethereal ideology to be displayed at a later date. This has led to a reduction of the vast socio-ethical implications in the church, creating an organism whose function offers little power toward the transformation of its members and their impact in the world. However, the sociopolitical nature of the kingdom of God is very real, biblically substantiated, and relevant to the embracing of the church's purpose.

We first witness the sociopolitical distinction of the kingdom in Satan's challenge to God's rule. This challenge, while spiritual, was also political in nature in that it involved an at-

tempt to secure a throne only God had the right to possess (Ezek. 28:11–19; Isa. 14:13–17). It was Satan who said, “I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly” (Isa. 14:13). Satan’s desire to “sit on the mount of assembly” was his attempt to hold the seat of divine government in the spiritual realm while getting Adam to surrender it in the physical realm. From the beginning, politics was an issue in the rule of God.

Other demonstrations of the sociopolitical nature of God’s kingdom include the command God gave to Adam that he was to “subdue” the earth under him, revealing the combination of the spiritual and physical aspects of a theocratic kingdom (see Gen. 1:26–28).

Next, the specific institution and creation of national government directly relate God’s kingdom program to the social and political aspects of man as well, especially since capital punishment is instituted in this period (see Gen. 9:1–7). That capital punishment was predicated on the fact that man is made in the image of God (v. 6) underscores the truth that God’s kingdom rule in the area of human justice has a spiritual and theological basis.

Further, under the patriarchs, Abraham was a participant in a covenant that included both land and seed. God promised to bless others through Abraham by making him into a great nation. This would come through the multiplication of his seed. Yet Genesis 15:18–21 also describes the portion of the cove-

nant specifically dealing with the land promised to Abraham. This covenant became the basis for Israel's spiritual as well as sociopolitical existence (see Gen. 12:1–3). Likewise, whether in the conflict of Moses with Pharaoh, or in the judges, a theocratic role in governing the nation involved social, political, and economic forces as the means of expressing God's rule on earth.

Looking toward the millennial kingdom, Messiah's righteous rule, we also see a reflection of the social structure of the kingdom demonstrating the inseparability of the sociopolitical aspects from the spiritual. Christ's future rule will bring about changes within the structures of society. It will mean that military warfare will cease (Ps. 46:8–9; Mic. 4:3; Isa. 9:6–7), slums will be removed (Ps. 72:16), political wrongs will be righted (Isa. 2:4; Ps. 72:4), and physical disease will disappear (Isa. 35:5–6; Isa. 33:24).

THE CHURCH AS AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL FOR THE WORLD

The church is the nursery of the kingdom, housing its values and exposing them to the broader society. The biblical purpose of the church, then, in light of the nature of the kingdom, is to reflect the spiritual, sociopolitical, and socio-ethical aspects of the kingdom. It is to be a model for the world operating in the world while providing an alternative to the world. When the

church functions as a kingdom community—not as a reaction to the world’s ungodly system, but rather as a divine structure operating in a liberating manner according to the way God has ordained it to be—the church sets itself apart as a haven, much like an embassy. This then shows those who are in the kingdom of darkness a preview of what the kingdom of God is all about.

In the movies, previews advertise coming attractions. Designed to entice, the preview focuses on the hot clips of the movie such as the chase scenes, love scenes, and fight scenes. The point of the preview is to whet our appetites for the upcoming attraction.

Someday a big show is coming to town, and it’s called the kingdom of God. God the Father is the Producer. The Holy Spirit is the Director. Jesus is the Super Star, and it will be a worldwide production. But until then, God has left previews of coming attractions in the world. We are His hot clips. God has left His church here to provide clips of the major production that is to come. Thus, the church does not merely exist for the church but for God’s bigger goal which is the expansion of His kingdom.

Unfortunately, most of our clips have been so weak in demonstrating the power and wonder of the feature film that few people show interest in picking up a free ticket. Instead of previewing an epic, we often merely reflect the sitcoms and soap operas around us. Until we, as God’s people, inten-

tionally embrace, apply, and reflect the kingdom, the church has little to offer the world.

While there is war in the world, there ought to be the existence of peace in the church (Eph. 4:3; Col. 3:14–15), and prayer for peace by the church (1 Tim. 2:1–2). While there is oppression in society, there ought to be liberation and justice in the church (James 2:1–9). While there is poverty in the world, there ought to be voluntary sharing with the goal of meeting existing needs in the church (Acts 2:44–45; 2 Cor. 12:12–21). While there is racism, classism, and sexism in the world, there ought to be authentic oneness in the church (Col. 3:10–11). Thus, the world is presented with the option of Christ by being what the church is supposed to be in the world: an alternative model for the world—a community functioning under the rule of God in His mediatory kingdom rule on earth.

Members of the biblical church model this alternative on the basis that we are citizens of the kingdom (Col. 1:13), having been designated as workers for the kingdom (Col. 4:11), promised victory because of the unshakeable nature of the kingdom (Heb. 12:28), as well as heirs of the kingdom (James 2:5). Further, the fruit of the church reveals itself to others as the “good seed” sown during the period of the mysteries of the kingdom (Matt. 13:38). The church is therefore uniquely positioned and authorized to carry out the mandates of the kingdom under the authority of Christ (Eph. 1:22–23) when

we seek the kingdom above all else (Matt. 6:33), empowered by the spiritual priorities of the kingdom (Rom. 14:17).

Since the church is to serve as a model partaking of this universal and eternal kingdom, and since this eternal kingdom is sociopolitical, flowing out of a biblically based spiritual foundation in nature, the church—as a spiritual body, led by kingdom-minded pastors—should also partake of the sociopolitical realm. The question is, then, what is the picture of the biblical church and its role with regard to justice? The next chapter will look at the centralized nature of the biblical church, laying the foundation for our discussion on the role of the church in personal lives and culture throughout the rest of this book.

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