Synoptic Gospels: The Kingdom of God

I. The heart of Jesus' proclamation according to the Synoptic Gospels was the presence and nature of the kingdom of God (Mk. 1:14-15).

II. John the Baptist

A. For several centuries, God had not spoken though a human prophet to declare his will.

B. The OT created the expectation that an eschatological prophet would come to prepare the way for the Messiah (Mal 3:23-24; Is 40:3-51).
   1. He would prepare people to be ready to receive the Messiah and he would point to the Messiah.
   2. The Synoptics present John the Baptist as this eschatological figure fulfilling Is. 40:3-5 (Lk 3:4-6).

C. John was the last prophet in the age of the prophets
   1. He was a transitional figure bridging the old age of the Law and the new age of the kingdom of God brought about by Jesus.
   2. He was the greatest of the prophets, but not himself part of the kingdom of God (Mt 11:11-13).

D. John’s message (Mt 3:1-11; Mk. 1:2-6; Lk 3:1-18)
   1. The kingdom of God is at hand – it is nearly here
   2. The king is coming
      a. He predicted the imminent coming of the Messiah
      b. Unlike John’s baptism with water, the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire
         (1) God will act through his Messiah to bring salvation to the righteous and judgment to the wicked.
         (2) The Messiah will pour out the Holy Spirit and fulfill the promise that in the new age God would put his Spirit in people’s hearts so they would obey from inner righteousness (Ez 36:14, 27; Joel 2:28-32)
   3. Repent to prepare yourself for the coming kingdom
      a. In contrast to common Jewish thought, it is not enough to be a Jew to enter the kingdom of God.
      b. Abandon your sins and turn to God to be ready for the kingdom
      c. “Repentance” is more than sorrow for sin. It involves turning the whole person toward God.
   4. Be baptized as an outward and public expression of your inward repentance.

E. John’s baptism
   1. John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance to prepare people for the coming kingdom of God.
   2. Lk 3:3 calls this a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”. Did John’s baptism bring the forgiveness of sins?
      a. It is not the baptism that leads to forgiveness.
      b. It is the repentance that leads to (Greek: εἰς) forgiveness of sins
      c. The baptism points to the repentance as an outward sign of this inward change of heart.
   3. Comparison of John’s baptism and Jewish proselyte baptism – a ritual bath the Gentile converts to Judaism underwent
      a. Similarities:
         (1) An initiation into the people of God
         (2) A ritual immersion in water
         (3) Represented a complete break with the old life and a sign of a new life
      b. Differences:
         (1) John baptized Jews, not only Gentiles. John’s point is that even Jews need to repent.
         (2) John’s baptism was a preparation for the coming messianic kingdom.

F. The significance of John’s baptizing of Jesus
   1. John objects since Jesus had no need for repentance because he had no sin

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2. Jesus says it is necessary to fulfill all righteousness (Mt 3:15)
   a. It affirms that John’s baptism is the genuine preparation for the coming of the Messiah.
   b. It shows Jesus’ identification with the people of the coming kingdom
   c. It provides the opportunity for God the Father to announce that Jesus is the Son of God:
      (1) A voice from heaven declares: “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased”
      (2) This confirms that Jesus is the Messiah
      (3) It shows Jesus is perfectly obedient to God (“in whom I am well pleased”)
      (4) The language has messianic significance (Ps 2; 2 Sam 7:14): He is God’s son, even as the
          idealized Davidic king was to be. He is the perfectly obedient, idealized king of Israel
   d. The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the symbolic form of a dove. The Spirit empowered him
      for his ministry (Lk 4:1).

III. The state of the world and the need for the kingdom of God

A. Satan and demons
   1. There is a world of evil spiritual beings that oppose the work of God. There is an unseen spiritual
      conflict between God and the kingdom of Satan, ruler of this world.
   2. Satan
      a. The devil is a supernatural evil spirit who is the ruler of the demons (Mk. 3:22)
      b. His major interest is try to block the redemptive work of God
         (1) Mk 4:15: He steals the word of God from people’s hearts so they will not believe the Gospel.
         (2) He planted the thought in Peter’s mind that Jesus should not die to fulfill the role of the
             Messiah (Mk 8:33).
         (3) He entered into Judas to lead him to betray Jesus (Lk. 22:3).
         (4) In the temptation of Jesus (Mt 4:1f) he sought to divert Jesus from his messianic mission
             through a shortcut to obtaining his kingdom authority by avoiding the cross.
      c. His seeks to induce humans to perform evil actions (Mt 4:1ff)
      d. Sometimes he is involved in causing disease (Lk. 13:16), but this is a minor theme.
   3. Demons also oppose the work of God
      a. Demons sometimes control of a person. The condition may be similar to insanity, but the demon-
         possessed have extraordinary power, super-human knowledge and speak with other voices.
      b. Demons can cause diseases (blindness, dumbness, epilepsy, but not all disease is caused by evil
         spirits.
      c. People are in bondage to these powers of darkness and need to be delivered by the work of
         Christ.
      d. When Jesus casts out demons, it is a sign that the kingdom of God has come (Mt 12:28)
         (1) Others exorcized demons, but Jesus cast them out simply by a word of his power (Mk. 1:27)
         (2) The demons recognized that Jesus was the holy One of God and obeyed his authority.
   4. The Synoptic Gospels avoid speculation about supernatural evil powers, unlike Jewish apocalypses.
      They are recognized, but Jesus conquers them as he brings in his kingdom.

B. The world
   1. Even though this age is under the domain of Satan, the created world itself is not evil
      a. God created the world (Mk. 13:19)
      b. God continues to sustain the world
         (1) He cares for all his creatures (Lk 12:4-7, 22f)
         (2) He provides the sun and rain for good and evil people. (Mt 5:45)
      c. God is Lord of heaven and earth (Lk 10:21)
   2. The Gospels do not show an anti-world dualism or anti-materialistic attitude, unlike Greek thought.
      Jesus enjoyed physical pleasures (Mt 9:10; Lk 15:1-2) and was criticized for this (Mt 11:19).
   3. Yet the physical world is not the highest good. “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and
      lose his soul?” (Mk 8:36). When riches become the chief aim, they crowd out the things of God (Lk.
      12:16-30)
C. The nature of humanity
1. As God’s creatures, we were created to serve God (Lk. 17:7-10)
   a. People find their value in their relationship with God
   b. We are completely dependent upon God and can never really control our destiny (Mt 6:27)
2. Jesus never speaks of God is the Father of anyone but his disciples
   a. Humans have greater value than animals or plants (Mt 6:26-30; 10:31)
   b. Only those who are part of God’s kingdom are his children (not “fatherhood of God and
      brotherhood of man”)
3. All people are sinful
   a. Jesus came to save people from their sins (Mt 1:21; Lk 19:10), even the lost of Israel (Mt 10:6;
      15:24). He forgave sins (Mk. 9:1-10; cf. Lk. 11:4).
   b. All need to repent and recognize our need for God (Lk. 13:1-5; 15:7). We are all like “lost sheep”
      that need to be rescued (Mt 10:6; 15:24)

IV. Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom
A. Jesus’ central message was the kingdom of God
1. From the start of his ministry, Jesus was “preaching the gospel of God: “The time is fulfilled, and the
   kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mk. 1:14-15; cf. Mk 4:23)
2. “Kingdom of God” appears 52 times in Gospels: Mt (4); Mk (14); Lk (32); Jn (2)
3. “Kingdom of heaven” (lit. kingdom of the heavens) only in Mt (32 times). It is equivalent to kingdom
   of God. It is a Jewish idiom that substitutes “heavens” for “God”, to avoid saying the divine name.
B. The Jewish conception of the Kingdom of God
1. The OT does not use the phrase “kingdom of God”, yet the idea is common in the prophets.
   a. Two fold sense:
      (1) God reigns as King both of Israel and all the earth
      (2) There will also come a day when God will manifest his kingship over the nations.
   b. The kingdom is described in a variety of ways, but “always involves an in breaking of God into
      history when God’s redemptive purpose is fully realized” (Ladd, Theology of the NT, 58).
   c. The kingdom is an earthly hope for an idealized earth delivered from evil and the damage of the
      Fall and human sin.
      (1) In the “Day of the Lord,” God would enter history in dramatic power to purge the world of
          evil and establish his perfect reign on earth
      (2) The prophetic hope was for the idealized, earthly reign of a Davidic king (Is 9, 11)
      (3) Daniel presents a later apocalyptic view of God in breaking into history through a heavenly
          Son of Man (Dan 7).
2. Jewish Apocalyptic view: A future state of affairs when God’s reign would be established and would
   bring peace and happiness to God’s people.
   a. It is close to “the age to come”, a common idea in apocalyptic works (1 En 71:15; 4 Ez; 2 Bar)
   b. Generally it is brought about after the judgment and resurrection of the dead through a dramatic
      act of God and/or the Messiah, often in a decisive battle.
   c. It was always eschatological. In some it is an earthly, historical kingdom (1 En. 1-36; Pss. Sol 17-
      18). In others it is more of a transcendental kingdom (1 En 37-71).
   d. Qumran looked for an eschatological battle between the “sons of light” (the members of their
      community) and the “sons of darkness,” in which God would intervene and bring his kingdom.
3. Rabbinic view: The reign of God expressed through the Law.
   a. Those who submit to God’s demands in the Law submit to the reign of God.
   b. This stresses the present aspect of the kingdom
   c. But there is an eschatological hope and prayer that all submit to God’s rule and obey his Law.
4. Zealot view: Sought to bring about an earthly kingdom for Israel through revolution (many first
   century insurrections (Acts 5:36-37; 21:38); Bar Kokhba A.D. 132, considered himself the Messiah).

C. Definition of the kingdom of God in Jesus’ teachings.
1. Many views historically:
a. The Church (Augustine, reformers, older catholic view). No longer accepted.
b. Classic liberal view (Harnack): Jesus' taught “the Fatherhood of God” of all people, “the brotherhood of man”, the infinite value of the human soul and the ethic of love
c. The reign of God in the individual soul (Manson)
d. An eschatological kingdom on earth as predicted in the Jewish apocalypses (Johannes Weiss, 1892)

e. Consistent Eschatology (Albert Schweitzer): Jesus was a Jewish apocalypticist who expected the eschatological kingdom to come in the immediate future. His ethical teaching was an interim ethic until the kingdom came. But the kingdom did not come and Jesus died in despair.
f. Bultmann: Although Jesus historically taught an apocalyptic eschatological kingdom, it must be reinterpreted in existential terms of the nearness and demand of God.
g. Realized Eschatology (C.H. Dodd): Although the kingdom of God is described in apocalyptic language, it is really the transcendent order beyond time and space that has broken into history in the mission of Jesus. All that the prophets had hoped has now been realized in history.

2. Most scholars today see both a present and future aspect to the kingdom: a realized eschatology and a futuristic eschatology
   a. W. G. Kümmel: A new age is coming in the eschaton, much like Jewish apocalyptic. The kingdom has already begun in the person of Jesus, although not in the disciples.
   b. M. Dibelius: The kingdom is altogether future, but it is so near that the signs of the kingdom are already here
   c. Jeremias: eschatology in the process of realization in Jesus life and ministry, but especially in his death and resurrection. In the resurrection appearances, the disciples experienced the Parousia.
   d. Classic Dispensationalism (Walvoord, Pentecost, New Scofield Bible): distinguishes the Kingdom of God from the Kingdom of Heaven.
      (1) The Kingdom of God is the broader term for the reign of God and includes people and angels all who submit to God (Unger).
      (2) The Kingdom of Heaven is the rule of God on earth in a literal earthly kingdom fulfilling the OT prophetic promises. Only Matthew’s Jewish Gospel shows this aspect of the kingdom.
      (3) However, the Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah and his offer of the Kingdom.
      (4) So Jesus introduced a new message opening his offer to people of all races and creating the Church for the temporary period between the two advents of Christ.
      (5) Kingdom of Heaven is postponed during the Church age, but will be realized in an earthly millennial kingdom when Israel will be converted.
      (6) Israel and Church are 2 peoples of God with 2 destinies.
   e. Ladd, Ridderbos, Schnackenburg and others: The kingdom of God is God’s kingly rule expressed in the mission of Jesus and in the Age to come. Ladd, Theology of the NT, 89: “The kingdom of God is the redemptive reign of God dynamically active to establish his rule among human beings, . . . This kingdom . . . will appear as apocalyptic act at the end of the age, has already come into human history in the person and mission of Jesus to overcome evil, to deliver people from its power, and bring them into the blessings of God's reign.”

D. Characteristics of the kingdom of God
1. “Kingdom” fundamentally has the idea of God’s reign. Only secondarily does it refer to the realm over which God rules.
2. The kingdom is not the same as the Church. The Church is the community of the kingdom and consists of the people who submit to God’s kingly rule, but it is not the kingdom itself.
3. Jesus’ teachings on the kingdom assume an eschatological two-age dualism much like Jewish apocalyptic literature.
   a. There will be an “end of the age” (Mt 13:39, 40, 49)
   b. In the “age to Come” (Mk 10:30) in which God will fulfill his redemptive purposes and reign.
   c. The new age will be inaugurated by the resurrection of all people (Lk. 20:35) and the second coming of Christ (“Parousia” Mt 24:3).
4. The future sense of the kingdom: futuristic eschatology
a. This aspect of the kingdom is rooted in the 2-age dualism of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology.
b. Jesus frequently spoke in the future tense about the coming of the kingdom and entry into the
   kingdom (Mt 7:21; Mk 14:25; Lk 22:16, 18).
c. The coming of the kingdom will mark the end of this age (Mt 6:10; Lk 19:11)
d. After the judgment, the righteous will enter the Kingdom and the wicked who will be cast into the
   outer darkness in Gehenna (Mk. 9:47; Mt. 25:34).
e. A society will be formed in which there is no evil (Mt 13:36-43)
f. This is often described with the metaphor of a great banquet (Lk. 13:28-29)
g. In this sense “kingdom” can mean the manifestation of God’s kingly rule or the eschatological
   realm in which God rules.
h. For Jesus, the Kingdom is universal: It includes both Jews and Gentiles.
   (1) Those who accept Jesus and his word in childlike faith are the true sons of the kingdom (Mt
       13:38; Mk. 10:15; cf. Mt 8:12).
   (2) By contrast, the OT and Judaism limited this kingdom to Israelites and sometimes the
       Gentiles who converted or were conquered by Israel (Ass. Mos. 10:8-10; Pss. Sol. 17).
i. The future kingdom also indicates the gift of eternal life and salvation (Mt 25:34, 46)
   (1) When the rich young man asked about how to inherit eternal life (Mk 10:17), Jesus answered
       in terms of inheriting the kingdom (Mk 10:23-24) and receiving eternal life (Mk 10:30) as
       synonymous concepts.
   (2) In this sense the righteous and the poor in Spirit will inherit the kingdom (Mt 5:3, 10; 25:34)
       and the kingdom will be bestowed as a gift on Jesus disciples (Lk. 12:32)

5. The present sense of the kingdom: realized eschatology
   a. Jesus also could speak of the kingdom as being present.
      (1) The kingdom began with Jesus’ ministry and is present in Jesus' person and message.
      (2) When the Pharisees asked when the kingdom would come, Jesus said the kingdom was
          already in their midst, but in an unexpected form (Lk 17:20)
   b. This goes beyond the OT and Jewish apocalyptic view.
   c. When Jesus cast out demons with a word of command through the Holy Spirit it shows that the
      kingdom is here (Mt. 12:28)
      (1) Although the eschaton has not arrived, the kingly rule of God has come – that divine power
          and rule which defeats Satan and delivers people from the power of evil.
      (2) Since the King is here, in one sense his kingdom has already come.
   d. Satan has been bound (Mt 12:29), although in the future he will be judged and destroyed
      (1) His power has been curbed; although he is a defeated enemy, he continues to fight against
          God (Mt 13:19; Mk. 8:33; Lk. 22:3)
      (2) Cullmann, Christ and Time, 148: Satan has been bound with a long rope.
      (3) The cross is like the decisive battle that later is viewed as the critical turning point in a war.
          Even though the war is not over, that critical battle has been won which will mean the certain
          defeat of the enemy (Cullmann)
      (4) The time of the binding of Satan is debated: the temptation (Best); whenever Jesus cast out a
          demon, Satan was bound and his kingdom was robbed (Ladd); more likely the cross and
          resurrection (cf. John 12:31-32)
   e. There is also the sense that believers in this age are part of the kingdom of God, in that we submit
      to God’s rule in our lives (Mt 18:1)

6. There is a tension between the “already and not yet” aspects of the kingdom
   a. There is a two-fold manifestation of the kingdom:
      (1) The kingdom is here in Jesus’ ministry which binds Satan
      (2) The kingdom is coming at the end of the age when God’s reign will be complete over all
          creation and Satan’s power is finally destroyed.
   b. This is what Jesus called the “mystery” of the kingdom (μυστήριον; NIV “secret”; Mk 4:11-12):
      (1) The kingdom that will one day come in apocalyptic power has already come in hidden form
          and begun work among human beings.
      (2) Jesus gave the disciples the mystery of the kingdom. Then Jesus told a series of parables
          about the kingdom that describe characteristics of the kingdom. (Mk 4; Mt 13)
(a) The parables show the present and future aspects of the kingdom: the present hidden form and its future perfected form.
(b) This was not something revealed in the OT and was only shown by Jesus to his disciples.

c. Time line of salvation history

(1) Jewish view: God would act at the end of this age and bring in the age to come. This is the Day of the Lord. Apocalyptic writings look for God’s action directly or through a Messiah

(2) NT view (Oscar Cullmann): Christ modified this Jewish time line and gave it a new center. The death and resurrection of Christ are now the center of time.

(3) NT view (Ladd): There are two sides to the kingdom: realized and future.

(a) The First Coming brought the kingdom in a spiritual sense for those who are Christ’s people

(b) The Second coming will bring the new age and the complete rule of God

i) An earthly rule of Christ for the millennium

ii) An eternal kingdom after that

iii) Amillenialists see only the eternal kingdom

(c) There is a 2-fold dualism, continuing the apocalyptic view:

i) Temporal: this age vs. the age to come

ii) Spacial: The heavenly realm invades the earthly as the kingdom comes to earth. God’s will is done is heaven and will be done on earth.

(d) There were temporary in-breakings of God’s rule prior to the coming of Christ, but his kingdom was not realized in any full sense until Christ came. But this is not part of Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels.

V. The character of God shown in Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom

A. God is a sovereign God, as shown in his rule as king and the proclamation of the kingdom.

B. He is a God of righteous judgment

1. Jesus calls people to a decision: Their response to him brings either salvation or eternal judgment

2. He demands that we become perfect as God is perfect (Mt 5:48), which cannot be achieved apart from his gift of righteousness and salvation.

3. Jesus frequently preached about the eschatological judgment (Mk. 9:47; Mt. 25:34).

C. He is a loving Father

1. He cares for all people. He provides rain and sun for both righteous and wicked (Mt 5:45).

2. Yet a special sense, he is only Father to those who are part of the kingdom of the kingdom

   a. Jesus never called anyone but his disciples children of God

   b. Jesus addressed God as Abba, a term of great intimacy with God. He told his disciples to address God in the same way; this is a term of great intimacy with God (“Our Father, who is in heaven”)

D. He is a seeking God

1. He is constantly seeking lost people, not waiting for them to repent as in Judaism (Lk 17)

2. Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Lk 19:10)

E. He invites people to come to him

1. God invites people to the great eschatological banquet. He wants them to share in his joy and blessing (Mt 22:1f; 8:11)
2. Jesus called people to repentance

VI. Hermeneutics digression: Interpreting Parables

A. Definition of parable: A story which communicates a spiritual truth by describing a situation from everyday life.
   1. Certain points in the story have spiritual points of contact that communicate this truth.
   2. It differs from allegory, because only a few aspects of the story have points of contact with spiritual reality.

B. Most parables only convey one major idea or a small cluster of related spiritual truths. The most common mistake is to try to draw too many points out of a parable.
   1. A parable is like an extended simile. Not every detail has a point of contact to the spiritual realm.
   2. Most parables have one major point. E.g. parable of the lost coin shows God's joy over repentant sinners (Lk 15:8).
   3. Yet the common idea that there is only one point in a parable is only partially true.
      a. Sometimes there is a cluster of related spiritual truths.
      b. E.g. the parable of the sower (Mt 13:3-9, 18-23) shows 4 responses to the Gospel message. But the cluster of ideas revolves around the central point of the proper response to the words of Jesus.
   4. The cluster of truths feeds the central idea of the parable. E.g. in parable of the sower, there is the secondary theme that Satan seeks to block the results of the proclamation of the Gospel. Satan is represented by the birds.
   5. In the parable of the prodigal son Lk 15:11-32, the primary point is that God accepts joyfully those who have wandered from Him and repent (v. 32).
      a. This is the point of the 3 parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and the lost son.
         (1) It is a response to the criticism of the Pharisees and scribes that Jesus welcomes tax collectors and sinners (Lk. 15:1-2).
         (2) They show the reasonableness of God's joy in accepting repentant sinners.
      b. But the parable of the prodigal son goes one step further and provides an additional element.
         (1) The bitterness of the older brother about the father's treatment of the returned son represents the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling that Jesus accepted sinners.
         (2) Jesus wants them to initially think the third parable has the same point as the third. Then he throws a surprise left hook to rebuke the Pharisees and scribes for their attitudes.
         (3) The parable has a secondary point that religious people should not be resentful that God forgives sinners.
         (4) There is one main point with a secondary subpoint.

C. Do not allegorize.
   1. Allegorizing tries to make every detail in a parable represent something else.
   2. E.g. in the parable of the good Samaritan, many details are part of the scenery: the oil (not a symbol of the Holy Spirit), the bandages, the donkey.

D. Although a parable is not an allegory, there are often several items in the parable with spiritual points of contact to convey the message of the parable.
   1. Jesus’ interpretation of the parables shows this (e.g. in the parable of the sower, the seed represents the message about the Kingdom of God (Mt 13:18) and the birds represent Satan Mt 13:19).
   2. But not every point has a referent in spiritual reality. There are only enough points of contact to convey the central point.

E. Many elements are simply part of the setting for the story and do not have spiritual significance.
   1. E.g. In the parable of the persistent widow (Lk 18:1-8), the fact that the judge is unjust does not imply that God is unjust or that He is reluctant to answer prayers. The focus of the story is that perseverance brings a result. If we persevere in prayer, God will answer.
F. The major point or an application of the parable is often stated in the summary statement at the end.
   1. Sometimes the application statement will be slightly different than the main point of the parable.
   2. E.g. Parable of the persistent widow (Lk 18:1-8):
      a. The main point of the parable is the importance of persistence in prayer (v. 1).
      b. Yet in v. 8 Jesus draws a surprising eschatological application about the importance of faith until Christ returns: “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”
      c. There is a close knit cluster of related ideas or applications drawn from the central truth of the parable.

VII. Discuss: What do the following parables of the kingdom teach about:
   1. The present nature of the kingdom?
   2. The future nature of the kingdom?
   3. The transition between present and future kingdom?

Group 1:
   Tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43)
   Dragnet (Matt. 13:47-50)

Group 2:
   Mustard Seed (Matt. 13:31-32)
   Leaven (Matt. 13:33-35)

Group 3:
   Hidden Treasure (Matt. 13:44)
   Costly Pearl (Matt. 13:45)
   Growing Seed (Mark 4:26-29)