

What is “the Kingdom of God” biblically?

By James Greig
(James_Greig@icoc.org)

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An Introduction.

The prime aim of this study is to assist members of the ICOC¹, who believe the Bible is God’s word, to a better biblical understanding of the NT phrases “the kingdom of God” and “the kingdom of heaven.” The word has been used with a narrow range of meanings within the group for 15 years or more which I will suggest are unbiblical.

The study may be open to the charge of pedantry by some. It will not, in the short term, lead obviously to more conversions or to a more godly lifestyle. The study is for those who appreciate the power of underlying ideas and concepts in church life, and for those who simply want to learn more about Jesus’ message – which was, after all about repenting, “... for the kingdom of God is near!”

To give the conclusion before the arguments, I will say:

1. The kingdom of God is a central concept in the NT
2. For Jesus and the early church it meant a new dimension of God’s reign, established at the passion-resurrection-ascension event.
3. The use of “Kingdom” with a capital “K” is not helpful, since “kingdom” in the NT is an abstract noun meaning ‘reigning’, ‘rule’ or ‘kingship’.
4. The word “kingdom” is never used as an adjective, and is rarely used without being followed by the words “of God”.
5. The ICOC is not “the Kingdom of God” in any biblical sense. (Neither is any other church – nor even the primitive church.) Associated phrases like “kingdom-wide” or “to all the churches in the Kingdom” should be avoided.
6. Adjectival use of Kingdom (e.g. Kingdom News Network, Kingdom Dreams, Kingdom Kids, Kingdom teacher) should be phased out.
7. Alternative phrases could be “ICOC family” or “brotherhood”.

The most controversial but perhaps necessary section is entitled “Towards a doctrine of a confessing church” which will question traditional ICOC views of ecclesiology.

The study is a request to restore a more biblical use of a term. It will inevitably call into question some of the ways of reading Scripture generally associated with Stone-Campbell churches/churches in the Restoration Movement (which I will sometimes call “restorationist” for simplicity).

James Greig
Oxford, October 2005

¹ The International Churches of Christ. In truth, this article is unlikely to be read outside this circle which for convenience I will refer to as ICOC. I am aware the labelling may in itself be controversial. However, the important thing is that the view of the Kingdom of God held by the group which was popularly known until 2003 as the International Churches of Christ (although often having different local names) was sufficiently common for it to be a marker. I recognise that there are many different and valid expressions of the group now. Conversely, I hope no group that was historically part of this movement and who shared, inter alia, the video news magazine known as “Kingdom News Network” will ignore the important points in this article simply because they wish to disassociate themselves from the ICOC. At the very least, I would hope a biblical study on the meaning of the Kingdom of God will be appreciated as a responsible contribution to the ongoing process of restoration and discovery, even if its conclusions are not universally accepted.

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Both the McGuiggan book (available from www.jimmcguiggan.com) and the writings of George Eldon Ladd on the subject are highly recommended.

NB.I have added emphasis where **highlighted bold**. *Where italicised*, the emphasis is that of the writer.

Chapter I: “The Kingdom, Jim, but not as we know it.”²

Challenging assumptions

If the ICOC, Jesus of Nazareth and the London terrorist bomber Muktar Saed Ibrahim were compared, they might not be thought to have much in common.

However, they likely all cherished an aspiration for the ‘Kingdom of God’ they were willing to sacrifice for which went against the flow of the religious world.

“At the 1974 Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization, Michael Green asked rhetorically, “How much have you heard here about the Kingdom of God?” His answer was, “Not much. It is not our language. But it was Jesus’ prime concern.

*“Dr I. Howard Marshall of the University of Aberdeen has commented, “During the last 16 years I can recollect only two occasions on which I have heard sermons specifically devoted to the theme of the Kingdom of God... I find this silence rather surprising because **it is universally agreed by New Testament scholars that the central theme of the teaching of Jesus was the Kingdom of God.**”³*

For this reason the subject of the Kingdom of God cannot be avoided by Christians. It cannot be avoided by Jews (Jesus was of course a Jew), for whom this concept lies behind much of the ‘land’ controversies in Israel today. Nor by Muslims for whom Jesus is a prophet.

Because of the dearth of teaching, the Bible’s message is bound to challenge some assumptions which have arisen. We may find “the kingdom” is not exactly as we thought it to be.

A Jewish view.

Today, in Jerusalem, as 2000 years ago, you will find Jews who are waiting for and expecting the “Kingdom of God” to appear. I met one there once who was a convert to Judaism who had moved there from London and was only too pleased to tell me how things were going to be in the new order of things where the Messiah reigned from Zion. Generally speaking, they are willing to wait for the Messiah to come first before claiming all the land that is theirs – although this is part of the issues that surround the Settlers movement in Israel.

This is nothing new. It is an Old Testament and intertestamental hope. Hence Herod’s fear of a rival when he heard “Where is he who is born King of the Jews?” This meant only one thing - a political rival. When the sign was put above Jesus’ head on the cross, it contained the charge against Jesus: “The King of the Jews”. This may be the most sublime example of ironic imagery ever. This was no less than Jesus’ coronation – but not like any coronation the human race had ever known before.

Jesus built on Jewish expectations of a Kingdom of God – but invested them with totally new meaning. He proclaimed the kingdom of God – but not as it had been known or recognised before. He was killed because the Jews did not buy the kingdom of God as he was proclaiming it to be.

² Apologies to Mr Spock in Star Trek.

³ Quoted in Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, London 1998 p. 69

Imagine what would happen if you put up posters around your city, announcing a public meeting and the topic “The Revolution is here!”⁴ Who would come? The same people that came to hear Jesus in Galilee! The anti-vivisectionists, the anti-globalisationists, the (few) remaining Socialist Marxists. And what did Jesus say in his manifesto, the Sermon on the Mount, about the coming revolution? “Blessed are the meek... Turn the other cheek... Love your enemies.”

No wonder Jesus was misunderstood! The Jews read into some of Jesus’ sayings the echo of their own powerful sentiment against the Roman occupation and the desire for a restoration of a Davidic monarchy.

*“The language of the gospel is essentially political language. To find 21st century equivalents we would have to start talking about God’s ‘unilateral war on terror’... ‘destroying the axis of evil’, ‘disarming the weapons of mass destruction’...”*⁵

*“Contrary to every human expectation that the kingdom of God would come in naked power, its actual appearance is characterised by utter powerlessness. Betrayed, deserted and denied by his friends, the ‘king’ is subjected to a Jewish ‘kangaroo court’, handed over to the Romans on the false charge of high treason, and crucified ... for a crime he did not commit. Astonishing as it is, this is precisely Mark’s message: the kingdom of God finally arrives in the shameful crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.”*⁶

Early on the day of his death, Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus Barabbas⁷ stood side by side. They have been viewed⁸ as two different expressions of the Kingdom of God (if we credit Barabbas with the highest of motivations for his insurgency). One used the weapons of this world, and the other didn’t. Whatever Barabbas’ true intentions were, the crowds emphatically rejected Jesus and his vision of the kingdom of God that day.⁹

Jesus was presenting the kingdom of God as the Jews had not known it before.

A Muslim view

Living in Oxford, we have the chance to mix with parents of school children from all over the world who come here to teach in the University. I asked one Muslim academic recently whether Muslims had any sort of similar aspirations to the Jews.

I was surprised by his answer! His expectation is indeed for the Kingdom of God on earth as for the Jews. And what was more surprising was who the leader would be – Jesus! He has a special

⁴ “One of the more interesting proposals for a modern ‘dynamic equivalent’ for ‘the kingdom of God’ in Jesus’ teaching comes from David Wenham. He suggests that Mark 1:15 might be paraphrased, ‘The revolution is here!’... The word ‘revolution’ seems calculated to shock, and makes the apolitical Christian hearer uneasy. But is that not exactly what Jesus’ ‘kingship of God’ language was bound to do?” R.T. France, *Divine Government*, London 1990, p. 22

⁵ Alistair Roberts, see bibliography for website

⁶ Paul Barnett, *The Servant of God* commentary on Mark, p. 29

⁷ The NEB and GNB are correct in using the name Jesus. Origen explains that this was Barabbas’ name, although it appears to have been suppressed for reasons of Christian sensitivity.

⁸ This is also the theme of Gerd Theissen’s historical novel ‘The Shadow of the Galilean.’

⁹ My favourite film is “The Mission.” Two monks fight to protect the Mission, a small community of Indian tribes people converted to Catholicism, from destruction by the forces of the Pope for political ends in South America. One monk, played by Robert de Niro, was a converted slave trader and he resorted to arms to defend the community. I found myself siding with him as he fired weapons to kill the aggressors, because justice was on his side. The other monk, played by Jeremy Irons, chose to walk slowly out to his certain death. He died in a hail of bullets, carrying the cross and leading a worshipping choir. If one of these two approaches had greater power, it was his.

place in Muslim thought. Of course they have the curious belief that he never died on the cross but was snatched up to heaven, and alone of all the prophets (except Enoch and Elijah) has never died. Because of this, he will come again. Muslims therefore believe and expect Jesus' prophecies about his own future reigning, and are almost as excited about them as you or I would be!

However, some Muslims cannot wait for this vision of the kingdom of God. Radical groups like Hizb-ut-Tahrir – banned in Germany and Holland but the largest Islamic extremist group in the UK – offer **a vision of a Caliphate**. Shiv Malik in the New Statesman writes about groups like Hizb:

“And most important, they offer an intense sense of purposeful belonging. They cultivate the idea that Muslims all belong to one community – the Umma- with one clear (if totally unrealistic) political goal: the triumph of the caliphate (an Islamic super-state). ‘Work for the caliphate,’ Hizb tells its recruits. ‘The caliphate will restore honour to your mothers and sisters.’”¹⁰

Some radical Muslims would like God's rule to be accomplished through an Islamic super-state with political and spiritual power side by side. It is not dissimilar to medieval Europe, which was brought down by the Protestant Reformation with its challenge of the established structures of authority. If an Islamic super-state were to emerge, it would, in time, suffer a similar crisis.

A medieval Christian view

It has always been tempting for the Church to “marry” the State and seek to be a “Kingdom of God on earth.” The influential Christian thinker Augustine of Hippo provided a theological framework for a City of God on earth based around Rome. In time, the united countries of Western Europe became Christ's Kingdom on earth, with the Pope as the vicar, or representative, of Christ. It was known as the Holy Roman Empire. The pope would anoint the Kings of the earth as Samuel had anointed David.

“His [Augustine's] thinking dominated the medieval church and was the source of what we call ‘Christendom’ – ‘dom’ for dominion or kingdom. He taught that the Kingdom of Christ was taking over the structures of power, the politics of Rome, the means of administration in society and was working through them in order to influence, control and recondition the world. The Christendom, the Kingdom of God, as understood by Augustine, was largely a political affair. The Kingdom of God grew stronger with more money, more military and more control of heretics.

“It is not that the church is quite one and the same with the Kingdom, according to this view, but that the church and its officials are the instrument of God's government, using the political means of secular pagan structures for implementing God's rule.”¹¹

Perhaps the last phrase, “God's rule” is the most important. In the OT, God's rule was seen on earth through his people, Israel. There was a temporal leader, the King, under a spiritual leader, the High Priest.

A modern evangelical Zionist Christian view

¹⁰ The Week, *Radical Muslims: why they thrive in Britain*, 23 July 2005, p. 20

¹¹ Roger Forster, *The Kingdom of Jesus*, Carlisle 2002, p. 5

Some saw the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 as part of God's plan for the restoration of his kingdom on earth. To do so is to misunderstand Jesus' fulfilment and alteration of the meaning of the kingdom.

*"The NT never leads us to expect there will be any fulfilment of the OT promises other than their fulfilment in Christ. We are not encouraged, for example, to look for their fulfilment in the State of Israel and to expect a new temple to be built there. That is to expect a renewal of the model that has now been dismantled."*¹²

What if 100 years ago, a father were to promise his son a horse for his 21st birthday? Before he reaches 21, cars are invented and the father, being wealthy, can afford to buy one for his son. Would the son take the car but keep wondering when he is going to receive his horse?

In the same way, Christians/Jews/Muslims looking for a restoration of a physical Kingdom of God will be disappointed! Something far better is here. With Jesus, the hope of Israel changed.

*"From now on the true Israel is not focused on the land of Palestine and does not consist of those who are physically descended from Abraham. It consists rather of his spiritual descendants: those, both Jew and Gentile, who follow his example and place their trust in God's promise fulfilled in Jesus ... (Romans 4:16)".*¹³

The kingdom of God may not look as they think it should.

The disciples' view

Even his Jesus' own disciples, right up to his ascension, appear to have misunderstood the nature of the kingdom of God.¹⁴

AC 1:6 So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

A Roman Catholic view

Unsurprisingly, the Catholic Church sees close links with the "Kingdom of God."

*"To fulfil the Father's will, Christ ushered in the Kingdom of heaven on earth. The Church is the Reign of Christ already present in mystery."*¹⁵

*"The Lord Jesus endowed his community with a structure that will remain until the Kingdom is fully achieved. Before all else is the choice of the Twelve with Peter as their head."*¹⁶

*"Henceforth the Church... receives the mission of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is on earth the seed and the beginning of that kingdom."*¹⁷

¹² Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture*, Leicester, 2003, p. 108

¹³ Roberts, p. 111

¹⁴ For an interesting comment that the disciples were not AS mistaken as the passage suggests, see Gordon Ferguson, *Revolution – The world changing Church in the book of Acts*, Woburn 1998, p. 29 foot note 2

¹⁵ G. Chapman, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* para. 763

¹⁶ Catholic Catechism para. 765

¹⁷ Catholic Catechism, para. 768

For Catholics, the church is the seed and beginning of the kingdom. Its leader, the Pope, is heir to the “keys” given to Peter. This is discussed in more detail below.

An ICOC view

The invitation to the Seattle International Leadership Conference in 2005 began:

“On behalf of the Seattle Church of Christ, welcome to the 2005 International Leadership Conference—for church leaders from around the kingdom.”

Are all believers (who are leaders) included in this invitation? No, because they are not from “the kingdom.” The “kingdom” is shorthand for the church which is the ICOC. The ICOC is “God’s kingdom on earth.”¹⁸

While I would support its motivation, the recent LA “Call to Brotherhood Unity and Revival”¹⁹ contains many typical examples of current usage. The opening paragraph included an artless use of the phrase.

“We are sure many of you have been in much prayer and thought about the Kingdom of God and our future direction.”

When we think and pray about “the Kingdom of God”, are we concerned about the reign of God on earth in a general way, or are we thinking about the future of “the movement”, also known as the ICOC? For almost 21 years I have used the phrase in this way. I am now embarrassed to admit it because it is so unbiblical. Not even the Catholics whose name means “the universal church” lay hold on the phrase “Kingdom of God” to refer to their international activities in the way done by the ICOC. As will be seen, **the Catholic use of the phrase is more biblical than ours - and we are seeking legitimacy on the grounds we are more biblical.**

What has been the position of the Teachers in the ICOC? I have only been saved much public embarrassment because little of what I have taught is in print. If it were, I would no doubt be the worst culprit. The following are a selection of comments from DPI/IPI/GCI/ICC books, although I have decided to omit details of authorship because I do not think any of them would write the same way today.

*“The kingdom established during the time of the Roman kings is **the church: the kingdom of God**... God’s people were supplied with an ever-increasing body of evidence to convince them that eventually he would establish **a kingdom on earth – the kingdom we call the church.**”*

*“All these approaches fail to deal with the fact that the **church is the kingdom of God on earth** (Col 1:13), and that the kingdom of God is among us (Luke 17:20)”*

*“The kingdom of heaven is where Jesus is king. It is the family of God!... **In fact, the kingdom and the church are one and the same**... Would you give up everything you own for the kingdom?”*

*“[Peter holds] **the keys to the kingdom, the church**... the kingdom is now established on earth in the church... [You] may wish to use this study as an alternate to the Basic Church study.”*

¹⁸ The position may be expressed (with the ICOC love of double equivalents!) as **ICOC = church = kingdom of God**. Chapter III in this study questions the latter limb. Chapter IV questions the former.

¹⁹ See www.laicc.net August 27 2005

“A number of New Testament passages seem to equate the Kingdom of God with the church – the body of Christ. One example is Matthew 16:18,19 where Jesus explicitly connects the two as he speaks to Peter²⁰.”

*“The Coming of the Kingdom. [On Matthew 16:13-19] Church and the Kingdom are the same and will be built on the truth that Jesus is the Christ.... Conclusion A. **The Church is the Kingdom of God on earth established in approx. 33AD.** B. Acts 2:42 As citizens of the Kingdom we must ... C. Matthew 6:33 we must seek His Kingdom first.”*

Whatever view is held as to the Teachers’ responsibility for pastoral matters and decisions, on matters of doctrine, there HAS to be a higher standard.²¹ I think this standard applies to me and all those who **accepted** the role and title of Teacher, even if there were times when we felt we could not teach freely. We should not ‘wobble on the hook’. We must take responsibility for both our theology and “terminological inexactitude.”²² **At best**, I and other Teachers used (and wrote about) the phrase “kingdom of God” in ways that were ambiguous. Speaking personally, I have been complicit in the wrong use and therefore share responsibility for the damage caused. The next Chapter deals with the question of whether any real damage was caused by the misuse.

I suspect most if not all ICOC Teachers would share John Oakes’s sentiments:

“As I have come to be more disturbed by the inaccurate ICOC kingdom theology over the past few years, I have tended to state more carefully and strongly what I believe the kingdom to be, even in situations in which I am not necessarily trying to explain what my view of the kingdom is.”

The conclusion? Deeper study may compel members of the ICOC to realise “the kingdom” is not exactly as they have known it, or been taught it, to be.

A Criminal’s view

Of all people, the thief on the cross recognised the kingdom of God and that Jesus was the king. Arguably he was the first new member to enter on Jesus’ death!

LK 23:42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³ Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

While everyone else was grief-struck or had departed, the thief on the cross was the only person to believe Jesus had a future. It is quite remarkable when you think about their circumstances.

Someone once said that during his life Jesus foretold the Kingdom of God, but it was the church that came.²³

Let us not miss out on life, salvation or the kingdom because it does not match our assumptions.

²⁰ I am not sure I agree with this. Jesus connects Peter with the church. He also connects Peter with the keys of the kingdom. It is arguably the case that *by implication* Jesus connects them, but Jesus does not, as the writer claims, explicitly connect the two to each other here. I do not think in fact there are any passages that *directly* equate the Kingdom of God and the church. The clearest two may be in Revelation and are dealt with in an Appendix.

²¹ JAS 3:1 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

²² A phrase invented by Winston Churchill in relation to descriptions of conscripted labour in South Africa.

²³ Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, 1908, p. 166 cited in Ladd p. 106

Chapter II: “What’s in a name?”

1. Do words matter? Cautionary notes from the Restoration movement.
2. ICOC use of the word “the Kingdom” – a kind of shorthand?
3. More sinister than a storm in a coffee-cup?
4. Was it always so?
5. Bringing the position up to date

1. The Restorationists’ emphasis on words

“What’s in a name?” Juliet asked in William Shakespeare’s famous play “Romeo and Juliet”. “That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

The statement is true. However, to call a carnation a rose in the hope of “selling” a carnation or persuading someone they are one and the same - that is more sinister. Juliet is right, though, that merely changing a name does nothing to alter the object itself.

The power of words has long been recognised by the Stone-Campbell Movement. *“Bible names for Bible things”* was a laudable motto. The simplicity of the name “Churches of Christ” appealed to me when I heard about the church. I was even more impressed to hear it was taken from Romans 16:20 and was a direct biblical phrase. “Eucharist” and “Sacrament” are not biblical phrases, but “Evangelist” and “Elder” are. In the confusion of the religious world, such simplicity is attractive.

In 1847, Alexander Campbell’s awareness of the importance of correct terminology showed in his critique of the 9 founding propositions of the Evangelical Alliance.²⁴ He criticised the use of the word “godhead” for being an unnecessary use of unscriptural wording. ‘Why not use a scriptural phrase like “the Lord our God is one Lord,” Campbell suggests.’ Later, he objected to the phrase “incarnation of the Son of God”, preferring to say that “the Word” became flesh because this is more scriptural.

“Campbell opens his third essay by emphasizing that the Bible alone, rather than official interpretations of it, stands as the secure basis of unity. The wording of the Bible is superior to the rewording of men. These views form a solid plank in the Stone-Campbell tradition. This helps explain why Campbell scrutinizes the language of the propositions in light of scriptural wording.”²⁵

These convictions form the key to understanding the mindset, not just of Campbell, but of the Stone-Campbell Movement and its offspring, including the Churches of Christ and ICOC. The convictions at first appearance are laudable.

These convictions formed the basis of a movement that would be known for its scholarship and Bible knowledge at best, its legalism at worst. Professor John Wilson of Pepperdine University recalled in a Rock Resources lecture in London in 2004²⁶ the period in the 1950s when the evangelistic approach of the Churches of Christ would make use of the Lord’s appeal in Isaiah, “Come, let us reason together says the Lord.” Although it is not clear how much exegetical and

²⁴ *Millennial Harbinger* (1847) p. 83, quoted in Baker, *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement*, IVP 2000 p. 32

²⁵ *Evangelism and the Stone-Campbell Movement*, p. 33

²⁶ John Wilson, “*Perspectives on the Beginnings of ICC*” Lecture, Rock Resources, 20 March 2004

logical argumentation the Lord had in mind, there is no doubt the phrase expressed the mind-based approach to conversion of the Churches of Christ. Debate and the correct use of words were equally the stock in trade of the British Churches of Christ in their golden era, in the days of David King, and in the earlier days of Alexander Campbell's public debates.

In general, then, our ethos has been one of responsible, solid biblicity.

Alexander Campbell, David King and John Wilson would surely therefore all approve of the following critique of current usage of the word 'kingdom' in Christian circles today (including, but not limited to the ICOC).

"What did [Jesus] mean when he spoke about the 'kingdom of God', and what sort of ideas would such language have been likely to evoke in those who first heard him? How far was he taking up a theme which was already current in the world of his day, and how far challenging people to new ways of thinking and of responding to God as king? And how far does modern usage of 'kingdom' language correspond to what Jesus intended?"

"It would be naïve to suppose that an appeal to return to the original understanding of the basileia tou theou can resolve the confusion in the use of such language today. Language (particularly religious language) does not work as simply or as mechanistically as that. Usage can and must change to meet new situations and new ways of thinking. But when a term has become as many-faceted as 'the kingdom of God' is now, it must be worthwhile to look back to where it began, and to see how the various different strands in modern usage have developed out of (or have been superimposed on?) the understanding of Jesus' mission which he encapsulated in this term. If in the process some aspects of modern usage are found to be inappropriate, or even perverse, it is as well that we should be aware of the fact, even if this book cannot expect to change the linguistic habits of a generation!"²⁷

No one who believes in the concept of restoration of NT principles and teaching can fail to thrill at this journey! Few things are more exciting to the Restorationist than toppling of idols, be they false doctrine, tradition or worse!

Those who fear this quest, or fear biblical study, are to be pitied. Guardians of hollow tradition, empty of Christ and full of their church tradition, they have received their reward in full. And if the ICOC thinks it has no such traditions and has fully, and accurately, restored the NT, it has forgotten that it too was a branch grafted on. It ill befits a restoration movement to be defensive in a matter of Bible study.

2. Use of the word 'Kingdom' in the ICOC – a kind of shorthand?

"In the next few months [after 1979] the Bible doctrine from Acts 11:26 of Saved = Christian = Disciple was crystallized. The Spirit then gave us a deep conviction that only these baptized disciples comprise God's kingdom on earth. This was and still is the true church of Jesus."

These words come from the Evangelization Proclamation dated 4th February 1994 and signed by the 10 or so senior leaders in the ICOC. It demonstrates the ICOC self-identification with the 'kingdom of God.'

The phrase permeates ICOC literature as a kind of shorthand. For example: -

- The ICOC has "Kingdom Kids" instead of the more traditional Sunday School.

²⁷ France, p. 2

- ICOC Members are (or were) encouraged to have “Kingdom Dreams.” In language more comprehensible to the outsider, this would mean aspiring for a role in doing or being something that would help the spread of the ICOC in the world as “God’s Modern Day Movement.”
- There used to be a document known as the “Kingdom Stats”. Staff members were encouraged to study, absorb and analyse the data for churches in the ICOC.
- The welcome page of my ICOC e-mail software continues to tell me daily that in the future I will be able to find announcements here about “kingdomwide” events.
- The video news magazine is the “Kingdom News Network.”

One of the official children’s classes is entitled “God’s Modern Movement.”²⁸ (This phrase is used interchangeably with “God’s church” and “God’s kingdom”.) The opening statement (repeated in the instructions to parents) is that *“in this unit, the students will look at God’s kingdom today! From the Gempels’ living room in 1979 to the fulfilment of the Evangelization Proclamation in 2000, the students will clearly see that God’s church is alive and powerfully advancing!”* From the context, it is clear that no events taking place outside the ICOC constitute an event in “God’s church”.

Official and popular ICOC usage.

In official literature and among the maturer leadership, the kingdom of God is a spiritual entity, the ‘invisible church’. However, it is still a concrete body of people with “territorial” limits. In other words, it is conceptually certain in that it must be true of any one person that they are in or out.

Some facets of **official usage** of the phrase ‘kingdom of God’

- **It is not co-terminous with the ICOC.**
- **Not every member of the ICOC is therefore in the kingdom.**
- **There may be members of the kingdom who are not in the ICOC (almost exclusively members of Churches of Christ or Christian churches who have the same doctrine on baptism as ICOC²⁹.)**

In **popular usage** of the phrase ‘kingdom of God’, the ICOC was/is the kingdom of God.

If we allow the simplified view that the kingdom of God comprises “baptized disciples only”, the problem comes with the insistence that to be a true church one must recognise and enforce a membership on this basis.³⁰ There are problems with this position both as a doctrine of church (“ecclesiology”) and with its application.

In other words, only churches which were striving to keep their memberships as close as possible to the standard of having only the truly committed as members were true ‘kingdom’ churches.

²⁸ Unit 22 of the Kingdom Kids curriculum for 3rd and 4th grades

²⁹ So while not co-terminous with ICOC, it is a very limited extension indeed and therefore non-threatening.

³⁰ Paul promises a pure church to Christ, and Christian husbands are to present their wives as pure. Certain (not all) sins and doctrinal purity may be matters of discipline. However, a requirement to “purify” members for a lack of “being sold-out”, or a lack of personal fruitfulness is not found in Paul’s instructions to Titus or Timothy. The removal of a lampstand may be done by Christ, as may the pruning, but who dare pronounce a group not fit to be in the kingdom? For what sin does any part of a church - for which Christ died – deserve to be called “the armpit of the kingdom”? On an individual level, how does one keep “disciples only” in a congregation? Who is qualified to rule on the requisite level of commitment? Did Christ really intend to give this power to leaders when he gave the keys of the kingdom to Peter? “Who dare condemn those God has justified?”

Periodic “purges”, “revivals” and cutting off the “fringe” were necessitated by a theology of the kingdom that failed to recognise the difference between the ‘kingdom’ as invisible church (if this is what the kingdom really means) and the ICOC as a visible church.

The determination to meld the two concepts (the ‘kingdom’ and the ICOC) as closely as possible (while recognising the gap cannot be removed altogether) is one of the aspects of Kip’s current “Call”³¹ that worries me. He writes:

“Though I commend the reopening of the door to the mainline Churches of Christ, the destruction of the distinctive concept of having “disciples only” in a congregation produced tremendous confusion.”

While Kip McKean may be confused by the ending of the enforced “disciples only” position, I am afraid in the NT church they lived with considerably more confusion than we in a restorationist tradition like to accept. A few months ago I heard an argument from 1 Cor 1:10,11 in which Paul appeals to the brothers to be perfectly united in mind and thought. “There you are,” the brother said. “In the early church they were perfectly united. Unity was not even an issue because they were just one church.” I am afraid that if anything, the need for Paul to write that verse indicates the opposite was the case.

The popular view, then, was that the kingdom of God was, literally, those churches around the world which belonged to a World Sector of the International Churches of Christ. These were the several hundred churches on a list which were required to watch a video magazine called aptly the “Kingdom News Network.” This was news from the within the ICOC and distributed across the ICOC. To be in this ‘kingdom’ meant subscribing to a number of beliefs and practices.

I gave a teaching day in January about rejecting a simple association between the biblical phrase ‘kingdom’ and the ICOC. I thought it was radical. Only a few seemed to get the point. Afterwards one brother came to me and said how much he enjoyed being in the kingdom because of teaching days like this. He went on to say that he longed for his daughter to enjoy the benefits of being in the kingdom. I am pretty sure he was not thinking of any charismatic church! He wanted her linked with one of the 500 (or whatever) ICOC churches. This is the popular use of the word kingdom. In summary:

- **The official use is to identify the kingdom with the invisible and true church of Jesus, understood to be virtually but not entirely co-terminous with the ICOC.**
- **The popular use is to identify the kingdom with the ICOC.**

We **benefited** from this clear definition of the kingdom. There was a very real **payback**. It made complex matters simple and allowed us to feel ‘one’, ‘a band of brothers!’. It gave us cohesion. It was our identity. And it kept us together (and apart from ‘the others’) until tested in 2002/3. Some of our want to ‘get back to things they way the were’ is because of the ambiguity that is experienced when this identity is threatened.

3. More sinister than a storm in a coffee-cup?

I have a problem with Starbucks’ use of language. They have a list of the coffees on offer on the wall behind the counter and their three sizes of cup: Tall, Grande, and Venti. These equate to a usual size mug, a large and an extra large.

³¹ Certain parts of the text of the call (24 August 2005) are available on the website www.upsidedown21.com but other aspects have been removed. A synopsis of the changes are at www.icocinfo.org

Recently I asked for a regular size and was asked, “Do you mean ‘Tall’?” I did not think the cup was particularly tall or small (although given the price I was paying I probably deserved a tall one!) I pointedly said, “No, I mean the normal, smallest of your sizes.” My order was then passed up the line in translation: “One Tall to go!”

Is this misuse of language harmless or sinister? I have to admit it is probably harmless and in the case of coffee I have over-reacted a bit!³²

The fact is that the word ‘kingdom’ has often been misapplied, both inside and outside the ICOC. R.T. France, a former Principal of Wycliffe Hall, a theological college in the University of Oxford points out that the meaning of the word ‘kingdom’ has become regarded by some as so self-evident “*that it has now come to be used as an adjective, as in the recent book titles Kingdom Mercy, Kingdom Ministry, Kingdom Living.*”³³ France also mentions having seen a van bearing the writing ‘Kingdom Car Service’ - and not being clear what was implied.

So what if the ICOC uses a phrase like “kingdom of God” in a certain way? There are three options.

- 1. The use is wholly correct and biblical.**
- 2. Alternatively, the use may be incorrect and do no harm - a “storm in a coffee-cup” of Starbuck’s proportions.**
- 3. There is a third option. The use is wrong and damaging.**

At least one teacher in the ICOC agrees that our use of the word has not just been incorrect – it has been damaging.

“I believe that this is one of the most important topics for us to understand as a church. Our narrow thinking on the kingdom (kingdom=church or even more narrow--kingdom=ICOC) has done much damage. I'm trying to combat this teaching wherever I go, but old habits die hard.”

Why might the view that “kingdom = church or even more narrow kingdom = ICOC” be damaging? The fears are well expressed by John Wimber, the same person as gave us “Kingdom Mercy, Kingdom Ministry, Kingdom Living.”

“Some Christians, unclear about the relationship between the kingdom and the Church, confuse the two and teach that the Church is the kingdom. This leads to serious error, such as equating church membership with final salvation...”

“When the Church is confused with the kingdom, leaders assume that God’s authority is co-extensive with the office they hold, that they are the rule of God. Authoritarianism and even cultishness can be an unfortunate result of this kind of thinking.”³⁴

Jesus said, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.” When we have identified the ICOC with the kingdom of God, this beautiful verse, designed to simplify our lives and free us from worry, becomes a tool of oppression and control. How sad.

³² Does it matter if we use a word or name incorrectly? It may do. Perhaps we objected to East Germany calling itself “The German Democratic Republic” when it had one party Communist politics. I have a similar objection to China being called “The People’s Republic” when ‘the people’ appear to be repressed, e.g. in the bloody suppression of Tiananmen Square.

³³ France, p. 11

³⁴ John Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, London 1992, p. 34

4. Was it always so?

I recall a conversation with a brother in a café in North London when he told me enthusiastically about a conference he had attended. Delegates had been encouraged, in view of the ‘unprecedented’ combination of its Restorationist doctrine of salvation and extraordinary growth, to refer to this family of churches as ‘the Kingdom’. I believe this was in 1987 or 1988. That same year³⁵, the term ‘disciple’ was officially coined in preference to the word ‘Christian’ to refer to our members, the idea being that it was synonymous with a saved state. I cannot recollect whether this was shortly before or after the split from the mainline Churches of Christ and the adoption of the name “International Churches of Christ.” At the time I loved being in the church for many reasons and had benefited from my involvement and the inspiration it provided. I was very committed to it and believed that we were the best hope (and more importantly, we were God’s hope) to change the world for the better. By ‘we’ I mean the ICOC, not the church at large, which seemed crippled by self-doubt, liberal theology and an abandonment of Scripture. However, even I told my friend I had grave misgivings at the change of terminology. However, to continue such doubts in those heady years appeared academic and futile, and I bought into it. I encouraged others to think of the ICOC as the Kingdom of God, both by my continued involvement in the church and by express use of the phrase in my own ministry and teaching.

In the earlier years of the London church after my baptism in 1983, we certainly regarded other Churches of Christ as being part of God’s Kingdom and welcomed speakers from the mainline Churches of Christ like Jeff Walling, Lloyd Mansfield and Jim McGuiggan.

The latter is a respected teacher in the Restoration Movement. He writes a balanced view of the kingdom of God in his book “The Reign of God” from which the diagrams below are taken.

“What do you think of when you hear the word ‘kingdom’? If you’re like most of us you will think of some territory or realm over which someone rules. This use of the word is legitimate and finds biblical approval in a great many texts. Since a king cannot rule over nothing, we quite sensibly speak of who or what he reigns over as his ‘kingdom’. Scholars are agreed, however, that the term speaks of ‘royal authority’ or ‘sovereign power’. It speaks of the power or authority exercise over a realm of people rather than the territory or people itself.

“The popular use (realm) is said to be the ‘concrete’ use of the word and the central thrust of the word (sovereignty, royal rule or reign) is the ‘abstract’.”³⁶

From the theological perspective of the ICOC, this study goes *backwards* (in this Chapter and the next) and *outwards* (in Chapter IV). Forwards is generally better unless you have taken a wrong term somewhere! I suggest we would have done better to stay within the scholarship and view of the ‘kingdom of God’ we had prior to 1987, as held and taught by men like McGuiggan. The move outwards is saved for the fourth section.

5. Bringing the position up to date

Old habits die hard, but there is hope that things are beginning to change. Official and popular usages appear to continue. The recent Los Angeles Call to Brotherhood Unity and Revival³⁷ in particular used the phrase freely and, I would suggest, in the popular sense.

³⁵ I understand that in the US this encouragement came earlier. This is from my own recollection of events in the UK.

³⁶ Jim McGuiggan, *The Reign of God*, Fort Worth 1992, p. 15

³⁷ See www.laicc.net August 27 2005

The opening sentence is this. *“We are sure many of you have been in much prayer and thought about the Kingdom of God and our future direction.”*

The statement continues to discuss events following the Unity Meeting in November 2002 and to move to the present situation. These excerpts are quoted only to illustrate current (and probably unconscious) usage of the word ‘kingdom’.

“There was support for maintaining a Kingdom leadership structure ... Most brothers who were serving in these Kingdom leadership positions resigned ... significant need for leadership on a Kingdom level to assist in meeting needs that cannot be met on a local level ... we have solicited advice from numerous brothers around the Kingdom”

Churches are invited to join an alliance by signing a Statement of Unified Beliefs, Practices and Brotherhood. LA admits, *“We also realise there will be some who may not be ready to join us in this action.”*

What will the status of these other churches be?³⁸ Will such churches still be in the “united Brotherhood” or even the “Kingdom”? If the phrase “Kingdom” is to be used in the future in what I have called the official sense (which is not a sense I agree with, but is better than the popular sense), will the LA family or the Portland alignment be any more than denominations? Portland would seem to believe that, in time, a new ‘Kingdom’ will emerge, although interestingly in their statement the phrase ‘remnant’ is frequently used and ‘kingdom’ not at all.

It seems that if the ICOC is/was the Kingdom, there is an unhealthy rush taking place for the Crown Jewels. Henry Kriete has expressed similar dismay in a recent letter to a brother: -

“I urge you to stop others from calling the ICOC ‘the kingdom’. It only angers or saddens those who hear that kind of language. You are not the Kingdom. We are all in the kingdom if we are disciples of Christ”.

... some positive signs?

However, recent developments hint at what may be possible once “kingdom” concepts are abandoned in favour of a more humble view of the ICOC as “a family of Christian churches”. Following the Seattle conference, a proposal was published on September 10 2005³⁹, intended to supersede the LA letter and I believe also the Portland “calling-out” invitation. It begins without reference to “kingdom” as follows:

“Dear Brothers and sisters: We are grateful to God for all he has done among our family of churches called The International Churches of Christ.”

“...As a fellowship of churches we again have the opportunity to do what many Christian groups would long for – to recommit ourselves to the ideal of searching out the Scriptures for biblical principles and working together to humbly and prayerfully become the unified, caring body of Christ that God wants us to be....”

“...When each part of our fellowship of churches works in unison and harmony, God will be glorified as souls are saved, healed and matured.”

³⁸ It is tempting to call them “non-juring” or “non-conformist” or “dissenters”. For the student of church history, the phrase “nothing new under the sun” comes to mind.

³⁹ The statement was first issued on a subscription-free website on 20 September. See www.icocinfo.org for more details and full text at this date.

From my own perspective analysing use of the phrase “the kingdom” for the purposes of this study, the absence of references is welcome.

The following are further positive signs from John Oakes and Gordon Ferguson – in Ferguson’s case from as long ago as 1998.

*“It will be helpful to establish a biblical definition of this kingdom. Some would say that the Kingdom of God is the church of Jesus Christ on earth. Others would say the kingdom of God is heaven. **In truth, God’s kingdom expresses itself in different ways at different times. In broadest terms, the Kingdom of God is anyone or anywhere over which God rules.**”⁴⁰*

“Many of us understand the basics of how OT prophecies about the kingdom ... were fulfilled in the church age. However, our view of and appreciation for the kingdom may yet be incomplete. We find it too easy to equate the kingdom with the church and to declare them one and the same. And, while it is correct to say that the kingdom includes the church, it is quite incorrect to say that they are exact equivalents.”⁴¹

... and the inevitable pain of change

If harmful, rooting out the terminology will be like drawing teeth. Why? Because it goes to our identity.

France identifies the use of such ‘kingdom’ language as marking cliques. In our everyday use of the word ‘kingdom’ in the ICOC, we assume that it is a phrase with a clear meaning on which we all agree.

*“It is, then, questionable, how far the ... use of ‘kingdom’ actually achieves any effective communication, **except perhaps within a clearly defined circle where a particular ‘in-group’ usage has been agreed.** But it is open to more serious objection than that, in that such usage purports to be based on the language of the New Testament; **indeed the reason for the positive ‘vibes’ which ‘kingdom’ language is intended to produce is that anything so labelled is assumed to be distinctively biblical.** It functions as a sort of hallmark whereby the genuine article can be distinguished...*

*“**Where is the harm in a convenient abbreviation?... In this case I do see a significant danger in the nearly universal modern use of ‘the kingdom’, a danger which is writ large when ‘kingdom’ comes to be used as an adjective.**”⁴²*

One response to an early draft of this piece expressed well the pain but necessity of rooting out such terminology.

“Occasionally as I read what you say, I am tempted to say that you are being too legalistic in condemning certain usages of words. For example, when we say Kingdom Kids, we could just as well say Church kids or Christian kids. None of these is accurate, and none of them is harmful. But then I am brought back to your point that the way we have used the phrase “the kingdom” is so egregious, that at least for us it IS harmful to use the title Kingdom Kids. In a different context from ICOC, I think this would be harmless, but for us, I have to say, you are 100% right. We need to stop using such terminology until we can surgically remove our unbiblical use of “The Kingdom” both from our mindset and our vocabulary. Thank you for making us all just a bit uncomfortable. I think that is what a teacher is supposed to do.”

⁴⁰ John Oakes, *From Shadow to Reality*, Newton Upper Falls 2005, p. 253

⁴¹ Revolution, p. 23

⁴² France, p. 12

Summary

So what's in a name? What should we make of the view that the ICOC is the Kingdom of God? If it is not, what should we make of the view that it is so close in scope and influence to being the Kingdom of God that all its activities are "kingdom" activities?

Are these views: -

- Correct and biblical?
- Wrong but harmless?
- Dangerous and unbiblical?

Chapter III: What is “the kingdom of God” biblically?

What about definitions? Well, some things are easier to define than others. The more I study this topic, the more I understand it does not fit easily into a definition. Should I have been surprised? After all, Jesus could do no better than to say, “The kingdom of heaven is like ...” He knew what he was talking about but could not put it into words.

I have attempted a definition and read many more, and have struggled to find a definition in some of the books I have read because presumably the authors have all come against the same problems I have. I now think it is beyond definition. Do we have to give up on answering the question altogether? Is this the same as saying, “I can’t answer the question.”

No. I cannot encapsulate what my mother means to me in a few words or in a card. But that does not mean I cannot articulate many truths about her.

There is an argument that uncertainty as to the true meaning of a phrase justifies or excuses using a meaning we know to be wrong. It doesn’t!⁴³

Sometimes it is easier to say what something is not than to say what it is. To an extent this whole study is about correcting a misuse of the phrase “kingdom of God,” namely its simple identification with the ICOC (or any other organisation). However, negative definitions can be cowardly and destructive if no attempt is made to explain in positive terms what the meaning is.

There is a series of humorous cartoons entitled “Love is...” with a suitable picture. The kingdom of God is never specifically defined in the New Testament. If you are not sure why, just try to write a definition that takes account of all the Bible passages! The “kingdom of God” is assumed to exist and it is... Well, let us study biblically what it is!

The Kingdom of God is... (from alpha to omega)

A. All around us (I feel it in my toes...⁴⁴)

“Now God’s own kingdom or rule is the range of his effective will, where what he wants done is done...Everything that obeys those principles, whether by nature or by choice, is within his kingdom... Accordingly, the kingdom of God is not essentially a social or political reality at all. Indeed, the social and political realm, along with the individual heart, is the only place in all of creation where the kingdom of God, or his effective will, is currently permitted to be absent.”⁴⁵

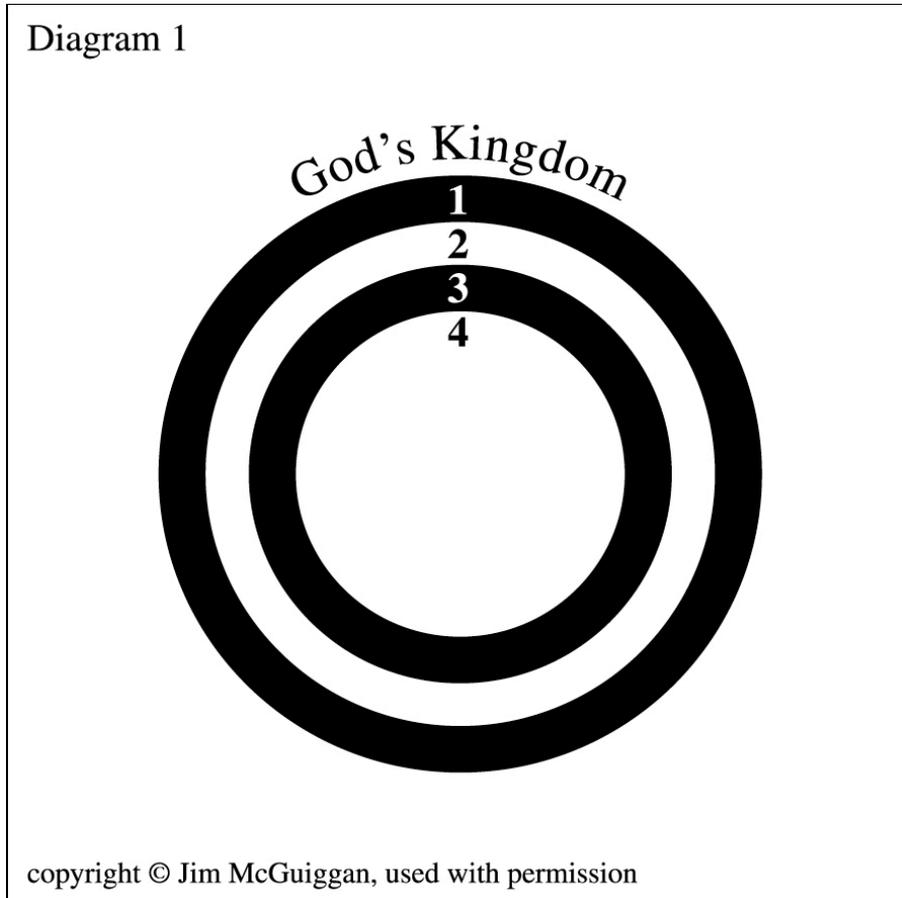
⁴³ Two Christians were sitting in a supermarket café discussing a passage of Scripture while their wives went round doing the shopping. The first man we will call wobbly William was losing the argument. His opponent kind Chris admitted he was unable to provide a good explanation, but ably demonstrated that the meaning William proposed was incorrect. William, knowing he was beaten, resorted to saying, “Well, until you can tell me the true meaning you are not going to stop me believing what I want to.” Just then a beautiful woman came into the café and Chris announced he was going to kiss her. William horrified said, “You can’t do that, she’s not your wife.” Chris, with a twinkle in his eye, said to William, “Why, who is she then?” William said, “I don’t know who she is, but she’s not your wife.” “Exactly,” Chris said.

⁴⁴ Apologies to those not familiar with Wet, wet, wet.

⁴⁵ Willard, p. 33

The kingdom of God did not begin with Jesus. When he said it was ‘near’ or ‘at hand’, this does not mean it did not exist before Jesus’ ministry. For Jews and Christians, God always has been and always will be reigning. If he did not, he would not be God.

In his book ‘The Reign of God’, Jim McGuiggan stresses “the multi-faceted nature of the one and indivisible sovereignty of God which holds sway over all and everything for ever and ever.”⁴⁶



1. The **invisible creation** (angels and the like, good or evil)
2. The **visible creation** (the universe, all the elements and the animal world)
3. Evil **men and nations** who while subject to God’s royal power choose to live **outside his loving favour**.
4. **The righteous who live in the sphere of God’s loving favour**. These would include the ancient worthies like the patriarchs and prophets who sit down in the kingdom of God with more modern disciples of God. (Matthew 8:11)

It is wrong to think the kingdom of God only came with Jesus or at Pentecost. Something happened to the kingdom – but it did not spring into being. God ruled not just *Israel* but the *pagan nations* during Daniel’s time and before, and ruled the *elements* during the plagues of Egypt, the prophetic period and right back to creation and the flood.

As the OT tells us,

“The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice!” (Psalm 97:1)

⁴⁶ McGuiggan, p. 33

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple... ‘Woe to me... for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty!’” (Isaiah 6:1, 5)

“The Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.” (Daniel 4:17)

B. he basileia tou theou

This is the Greek phrase in question in the NT.

The word ‘kingdom’ (*malkut(a)* in Hebrew/Aramaic and *basileia* in Greek) is an abstract one, along the lines of ‘reigning’ or ‘kingship’. The nub of the problem is that the capital ‘K’ is missing. The phrase the ‘kingdom of God’ in Greek is actually about something God does. It is not about a clearly identifiable ‘thing’ at all.

“Hence the various attempts of scholars to substitute such terms as ‘reign’, ‘rule’, ‘kingship’ or ‘sovereignty’ for ‘kingdom’, attempts which are generally regarded as well-intentioned, but which have yet to affect general usage significantly...”

“I have offered the phrase ‘divine government’, as another way of avoiding the unfortunate territorial or institutional implications of ‘kingdom’, while retaining its dynamic focus.”⁴⁷

A paradigm shift of this sort is difficult to appreciate. Additional illustrations and quotations may help.

It is the difference between ‘the Kingdom of the Apes’ and ‘the Planet of the Apes’ if you will! The Kingdom of the Apes is a territorial expression. We are not talking about the apes taking over our human world, as happened in the Planet of the Apes! The expression does not mean the ruling of the apes or reign of the apes (using a small ‘k’ in kingdom and using the word in an abstract sense).

The Queen of England has many titles. One of them is (or was) that she reigned over certain “Dominions”, including the “Dominion” of Canada. Dominion has a usual meaning with a small ‘d’ to mean control. The word “Dominion” has derived from that earlier, normal word to mean a territory over which she reigns. As a result we can talk of the “Dominions” of the Queen, and we know it is territorial.

C. Capable of Entry; with Conditions of Entry

Although the reign of God is abstract, the kingdom of God is talked about in terms of entry. You can be ‘in’ or ‘thrown out’ of the kingdom. Only the childlike will ‘enter’ it. It is hard for the rich to ‘enter’, but not impossible.

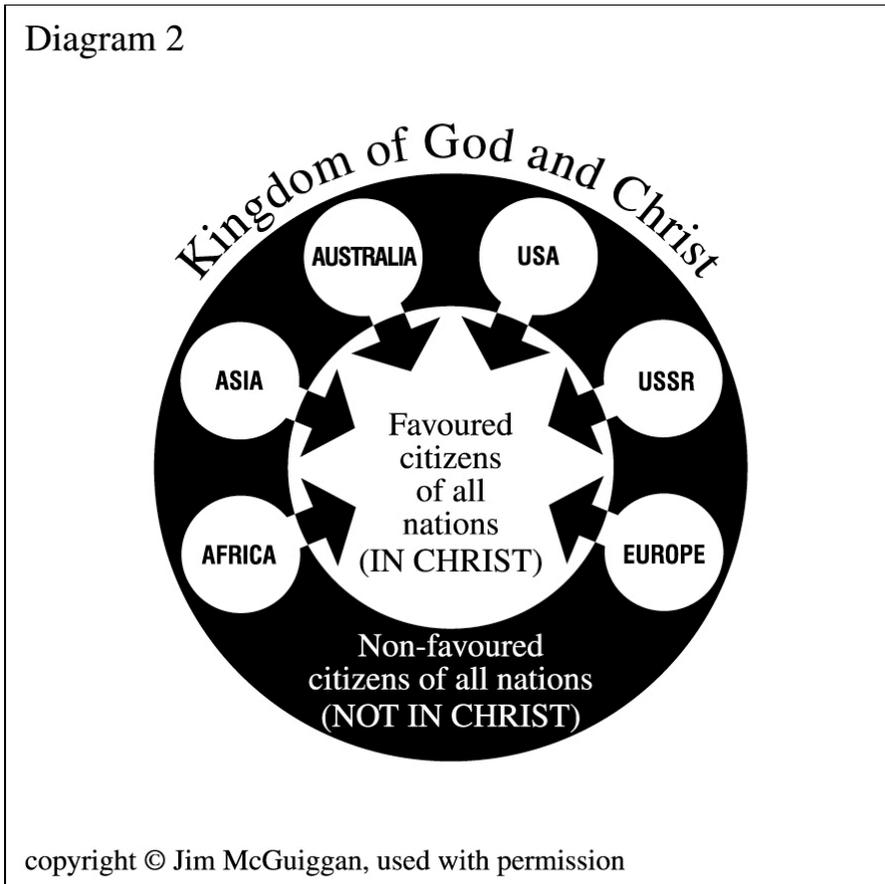
How can we enter what we cannot escape from?

*“The answer is simple enough: what we are now looking at is a different aspect of the ‘kingdom’... The kingship of God and Christ is universal, all-embracing. Within that all-embracing sovereignty there is a favoured state **and** a state in which people choose to ‘live’ without God and therefore outside his favour. Christ is, for example, ‘King of the Jews’ whether they commit their lives to him or reject him. Those who*

⁴⁷ France, p. 12, 13

choose him as king are graciously regarded as his 'people', his 'citizens'. When a former rebel gladly acknowledges God as his King in Christ his relationship with God within the kingdom is changed. He moves from a non-favoured state into a favoured state. The change or lack of it depends on our response to Christ."⁴⁸

To use another illustration, you may be 'in' a kingdom but not be in the favour of the ruler. The London bombers who set off bombs on 7 July were not in tune with the country's rulers. Yet the shock was to realise these were all subjects of the United Kingdom. The diagram below may help.



The Kingdom is talked about in terms of a favoured status – being “God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule and blessing” in the words of Goldsworthy and Roberts.

*It is possible to choose not to have Christ as King over us (cf John 19:15 and Luke 19:11-15), but he will be King over us one way or another (see Luke 19:14-15). In all the texts which speak of **conditional** entry into the kingdom of God we should recognize that only one aspect of his sovereign reign is in view. It’s that favoured state we enter when by grace we meet the conditions of entry.*"⁴⁹

D. Dynamically, not just doctrinally discerned

Biblically, God is not tied to revealing himself through the Bible. That is not contradictory. This is not the fault of the Bible. It is rather that God does not always reveal himself through the

⁴⁸ McGuiggan, p. 62

⁴⁹ McGuiggan, p. 63

science of correct interpretation of Scripture, which tends to elevate the mind over the spirit. This tendency is absolutely fundamental to the identity of the Stone-Campbell movement, one of whose founders, Thomas Campbell, “left no doubt about the pillars of the movement. They were self-reliance and the Bible.”⁵⁰

The dangers of such self-reliance (masquerading as unassailable Scriptural authenticity) led the Jews to reject Jesus (“We know this man is a sinner” John 9) and threatened Peter’s outreach to the Gentiles until God showed him, through a dream (and contra the Torah), that he might actually “Kill and eat” something which, through his lifelong reading of the Scripture, he had regarded as unclean. Abraham himself was told to commit child sacrifice – and was commended for his faith in obeying! The dramatic intervention of the outpoured Holy Spirit confirmed Peter had to rethink his theology, just as the intervention of Christ on the Damascus Road forced Paul to rethink his. ***Dynamic events forced new viewings of Scripture which they had missed!***

John 5:39 You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me,⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

Biblically, it is recorded that God revealed truth to those who would open their eyes to new interpretations of ‘old’ (to them) truth. Although he may often reveal truth through the study of the text, with our minds consecrated by prayer, **biblically he is not limited to this.**

When dealing with the Pharisees, Jesus appeals to ‘dynamic’, not ‘doctrinal’ evidence of the coming of the kingdom of God in his ministry.

LK 11:17 Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: "Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall.¹⁸ If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebub.¹⁹ Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges.²⁰ But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you.

This is not to deny the importance of doctrinal assessments and the reality of heresy. It is however pointing out that biblically, we would be in error to deny the possibility of God revealing or pointing to his kingdom now through the evidence of our eyes. God has his own staircase to earth and is not afraid to use it. (See also John 3:5-8. Acts 11:4-7, 15-18, Gal 3:2.)

Where does this leave the Bible? In the dust? No, for God “is not a man, that he should change his mind.” Rather, we are open, as Peter or Paul were, and the Pharisees generally were not, to radical rethinking of an interpretation when dynamically God intervenes. “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” (Heb 4:7)⁵¹ This takes humility, but is surely part of the thrill of restoration. However, the goal of this restoration is not the romantic search for the ‘pristine

⁵⁰ Mark Noll in *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement* p. 11 The full quote is as follows: “The Restorationist spirit was also indicated by insistence that the Bible was a plain book to be appropriated by every man for himself... Thomas Campbell’s early manifesto of American Restorationism, his Declaration and Address of 1809, left no doubt about the pillars of the movement. They were self-reliance and the Bible... No mere ‘human interpretation’ of the Bible or ‘human opinions’ of any sort should stand in the way of appropriating ‘the Divine word alone for our rule; the Holy Spirit for our teacher and guide, to lead us into all truth; and Christ alone, as exhibited in the word, for our salvation.’ For his part, Alexander Campbell professed to steer by the same lights: “there is not a man upon the earth whose authority can influence me, any farther than he comes with the authority of evidence, reason, and truth... I have endeavoured to read the Scriptures as though no one had read them before me.”

⁵¹ The writer to the Hebrews is citing an OT passage to apply to his, present day. The voice, in the context of Hebrews, is the new voice of the gospel, and the writer is urging his hearers not to return to mainstream Judaism without Christ. Is it biblical to apply such an OT text to a fresh call of God?

purity' of a 1st century church (reminiscent of Camelot), but the dynamic rediscovery that God has a plan for the 21st century church (which is rather more real).

E. Entered by water and spirit

There is a fascinating exchange of views on whether Jesus had baptism in mind in John 3:5.

- (1) The early Christians understood the passage to be about baptism. Arguably they ought to know, since they were closest in time, language and culture to Jesus, John and the other apostles.⁵²
- (2) Craig Blomberg claims the passage could not be about baptism since John the gospel writer would be guilty of revisionism if he put passages about baptism into Jesus' mouth in this way. Since baptism was a concern of the early church rather than Jesus, baptism could not be what Jesus had in mind.⁵³
- (3) Nonsense, says Beasley-Murray in his work "Baptism in the New Testament."⁵⁴ Jesus talked about the Spirit "whom those who believed in him were later to receive" (John 7:39) and his own resurrection. All these matters made little sense at the time but would have made sense later. (See John 12:16)

Cognisance refers to the *mens rea*, or the state of mind of the subject of baptism. The question of cognisance (and mode) must be addressed. Can someone have entered the kingdom "by water" who has only been sprinkled with it? Can someone walk through several doors and mistake at which point he actually entered the building? His entry to the kingdom depends not on the precision of his understanding but his faith in Christ. To insist on perfect knowledge of the point of entry into that kingdom smacks of the nit-picking more often associated with the Pharisees than Jesus. Faith must be in Christ, not in the act of baptism. However, baptism for the NT Christians meant the moment of new birth and forgiveness. Their understanding was that this was the moment of, not the grounds or cause of, their salvation. There is "cross-party" agreement on this point among academics.⁵⁵

A conversation illustrating the issue might arise as follows:

- Q: What does a person have to do to be saved?
A: Repent and be baptised (Acts 2:38)
Q: What if someone has done these things in this order but would not answer the question as you have?
A: He is lost.
Q: So you are adding a requirement?
A: A person has to know what he is doing for it to be effective.

For the avoidance of doubt, the ICOC will give the answers of A, i.e. cognisance is an essential requirement. Debates on baptism are therefore likely to continue. I think there are two issues.

⁵² For more on this, see first David Bercot, *Will the Real Heretics please stand up*, Tyler 1989 Chapter 8 (What Baptism meant to the Early Christians) and Ed Anton, *What does it mean to be 'Born of Water and Spirit'?* Greek Exegesis, Regent University BNTB 542 April 27, 2002

⁵³ See the Essay by Craig Blomberg, *Evangelism and the Stone-Campbell Movement*, p. 153

⁵⁴ G. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids 1962, p. 229. An association with Ezekiel 36 and 37 is expressly rejected (see p. 228)

⁵⁵ For example, Michael Green (Evangelical Anglican), David Bercot (former Jehovah's Witness, now Anglican), Kevin Roy (Baptist), George Beasley-Murray (Baptist), James Carleton-Paget (Roman Catholic)

- (1) What does the Bible teach? I think it teaches baptism as the moment of coming ‘into’ Christ in a process which includes faith, repentance and ongoing discipleship. This has been called “The truth that cannot be contradicted.”⁵⁶
- (2) How do I treat those who have a different view of Baptism? I cannot regard them as lost if they were baptised upon profession of Christ simply because they were taught differently as to its meaning.

This is an extremely difficult paradigm leap for someone in a restorationist mentality. It has been hard for me. I carry a donor card in the event I die in an accident. I wrote on the donor card my final message and plea to my family. Although they had all been baptised, I was convinced their understanding was fatally defective and that their baptism would be ineffective. I hoped a voice from the grave might help.

For those who regard cognisance as essential, Alexander Campbell must be regarded as lost – not merely in a questionable state, but in fact and as a matter of doctrine lost. Why? He was not re-baptised after his formulation of baptism providing “assurance for the forgiveness of sins”. For those outside ICOC, the idea is nothing short of madness. Who could imagine that being a Methodist might **require a belief that necessitates** John Wesley’s damnation? Or that one cannot be Lutheran without believing the equivalent for Martin Luther? Yet for the restorationist, the idea “Let God be true and every man a liar” (Ro 3:4) permits the suspension of all faculties in the name of faith and true doctrine.

Both the above issues for the restorationist have been better expressed, both by restorationists and Beasley-Murray himself:

*“At root, we believe this is a hermeneutical discussion, not a heart problem. The present tension is the result of centuries of tradition and debate over particular texts in Scripture. We must approach the discussion with hermeneutical humility, recognizing that not only are we influenced by those centuries, but also that our conclusions are open to criticism and subject to Scripture. But while the form, subject and meaning of baptism is debated among professing Christians, in the light of Scripture and historic Christian tradition none should be considered disciples of Christ who refuse to be baptized and reject baptism as God’s command.”*⁵⁷

*“But I cannot think it would have entered the head [of an early Christian teacher] to round off [a systematic treatment of certain basic aspects of Christian thought] with a section entitled, ‘The necessity of baptism’. Who would have wished to raise the question? It would have sounded [...] strange to a first generation Christian... It is only because in the development of the Church the whole complex of baptism – faith – confession – Spirit – Church – life – sanctification has been torn asunder that the question has been forced upon us as to the relationship between baptism as an act and that which it represents, and whether the reality can be gained apart from the act with which it is associated in the New Testament.”*⁵⁸

This will be an ongoing issue for restorationists and baptism is not the principal concern of this study. However, a study on the kingdom of God from a biblical viewpoint cannot ignore John 3:5.

F. Foretold by Daniel

⁵⁶ Henry Kriete sermon title

⁵⁷ Hicks and Taylor, *Down in the River to Pray*, Siloam Springs 2004, p. 182

⁵⁸ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, Grand Rapids 1962, p. 298

DA 7:13 *"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*

This is a key passage for Jesus. Many scholars agree his self-designation as the Son of Man was unique for Jewish rabbis and was based upon this passage in Daniel. Since Jesus' message in the gospels was centred on the coming near of the kingdom of God, the references to the kingdom in this same passage should also be noted.

- The direction of the son of man's approach 'with the clouds' is heavenward. This is therefore not the second coming as such.
- He is given more than earthly authority – he is worshiped by 'all peoples, nations and men of every language'. He is therefore not just human (the clear inference from the phrase 'son of man') – but divine.
- The Messiah designation did not of necessity carry divinity for the Jews. God's chosen saviour could have been a mortal but charismatic leader.
- He is given authority by the Ancient of Days.
- The reigning will be forever in the language of Daniel 2.

DA 2:44 *"In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. ⁴⁵ This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands--a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces.*

While the church has risen, been corrupted, fallen and been purified, Jesus' own reign began and will never be destroyed. This is not, then a reference to the church. If any Christian group could claim to be the true 'kingdom of God' as a result of having been prophesied here, it would have to be the Catholic Church.⁵⁹

And when did Christ's reign begin? Jesus in effect told his disciples his reign had begun when he met them on the mountain in Galilee.

MT 28:18 *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

- We see authority having been given
- We see heavenly authority added to earthly, for the God-man Jesus
- We see all nations in view
- We see a rock solid assurance of his governance and presence to the end of the age

G. Governed by Christ the King; Grown by the Holy Spirit

⁵⁹ "And the papacy is the oldest, as well as arguably the most influential of all human institutions. The Roman Empire was new-born when the first popes ascended the throne of St Peter almost two thousand years ago. When Karol Wojtyla became the 261st Pope in 1978, the dynasty he represented had outlived not merely the Roman and Byzantine empires, but those of Carolingian Gaul, of medieval Germany, of Spain, of Britain, and the Third Reich of Hitler. Wojtyla himself was to play a not inconsiderable role in the collapse of the latest of these empires, the Soviet Union." Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners – A History of the Popes*, London 1997, p. xi

Christ is now King! He is the heir to the Davidic throne. Col 1:12, 13 which referred to “the Kingdom of the Son he loves.” Jesus may rightly be considered the King in biblical Kingdom theology. (See also Matt 25:31, 34)

Continuing the Kingdom of God’s spiritual identity, this parable shows the source of the growth that is seen on the earth:

MK 4:26 He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain--first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

The relationship between man’s work and the spread of the reign of God is shown in this lovely parable of Jesus. It is in contrast to the works of men necessary to build, defend, protect and grow an organisation intent on preserving its self-proclaimed identity with the Kingdom. Those who have tried would testify that this is indeed a heavy load. Work and labour are not excluded in this picture or indeed in the New Testament – but biblically true and lasting growth is a matter of even greater concern to God than to any of us.

H. Hard at the centre, soft at the edges

Within two chapters, Jesus appears to make contradictory statements.

LK 9:49 "Master," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us." ⁵⁰ "Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."

LK 11:23 "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters."

The explanation of this apparent contradiction is whom Jesus is speaking to. Jesus always challenged the heart, but as a teacher what he was really interested in was the change wrought in his hearers than in laying down definitions. Not all his strong language is intended to create delineations.

Drawing lines leads to impossible quandaries, which cannot be ‘policed’ by the leadership. This becomes a pastoral difficulty rather than a doctrinal one.⁶⁰

I. In-between the times

A ‘kingdom of the son’ has come (see Colossians 1:13) and we are members of that kingdom. However, Paul told the saved Christians in Thessalonica that God “calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thess 1:12). Peter tells the brothers that if they do certain things, they “will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:11) Paul tells us that “flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom of God.”(1 Cor 15:50) Did Paul realise

⁶⁰ In 1991 in a desperate attempt to salvage a church defined by its commitment, a novel pastoral solution was to excommunicate all the church members! They then had to re-qualify. It was called a Revival. It led to bizarre results. One brother told me it had gone badly wrong in his congregation. In practice, after some had been restored to membership (and thereafter relaxed their standards), those seeking readmission actually showed higher levels of commitment (therefore were hotter?!) in spite of being technically off the membership. That congregation called off the experiment! Although not formally told they excluded from the kingdom during this period, the statement “I’d rather be on the membership than off it when judgment day comes” carried its own threat.

he had misunderstood the kingdom between writing these two passages (in whichever order) and did he then correct his view of whether Christians were already 'in' the kingdom? Surely not! Did Peter have it right all along and correct Paul's view? Surely not.

The truth is that virtually all the aspects of our inheritance as Christians in the NT era are treated in this same, seemingly contradictory way in the NT.⁶¹ The standard way to refer to it in theology books is the "already-not yet" dichotomy of the NT era.

The best analogy I know is that of the final phase of World War II. Although it is not a perfect parallel, we live in the NT era not unlike Europe between D-Day (6 June 1944) and VE day (8 May 1945). Victory was assured following D-Day, but much work, many crises, much blood, several counter-attacks and a number of defeats lay between the two dates. Satan is beaten but not yet toothless. Christ has overcome the world, but we must still persevere and overcome to be saved. Christ's rule has begun, but most even now do not bend the knee.

J. Jesus' Message

*"It has been said that Jesus was obsessed with the Kingdom. The quickest glance at the synoptic gospels reveals that there is no question that the Kingdom is what Jesus preached... The word 'Kingdom' appears more than 83 times in the synoptic gospels, yet it is used only four times in John's gospel."*⁶²

This ignores duplicated passages, i.e. it represents 83 separate occasions.

However, the phrase is rarely used elsewhere, as a quick look at Appendix 1 will show.

An observer will ask, "Was the Protestant Pauline gospel the same as the simple Good News that Jesus proclaimed? The dichotomy expressed itself as 'Jesus preached the Kingdom while Paul preached Jesus'." Closer investigation reveals that the message to Gentiles included Jesus' kingship in a new kingdom. For example, the charge against Jason, Paul and Silas in Thessalonica was that "they are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus."⁶³ Moreover, there is little disagreement that at least 2 of the 3 synoptic gospels (which are the 'mother lode' of kingdom references) were evangelistic documents produced for the Gentile mission field. So the statistics confirm (i) the kingdom to have been an important topic in Gentile evangelism to be included and (ii) that it was Jesus' principal message. As Forster says,

*"The Kingdom was the one and only message of Jesus. The very purpose of his coming was to preach the good news of the Kingdom."*⁶⁴

*"Who is Jesus and what was his message? [Daniel 7:13-14] provide the embryonic answers: Jesus is the Son of Man and his message was the Kingdom of God."*⁶⁵

As Jesus himself said: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent."⁶⁶

⁶¹ This extends to the language of being saved (am I already saved, or will I be saved when I pass the judgment day?) and whether or not I am holy. You can even find the dichotomy within a single verse Hebrews 10:14, which says that "by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." So am I complete, or am I a work in progress? Both is the answer. The teacher and preacher must continually be aware of this dynamic and there are dangers in ignoring either.

⁶² Forster, p. 1

⁶³ Acts 17:7

⁶⁴ Forster, p. xiv

⁶⁵ Forster, p. xv

But this is identical with John the Baptist's message. "The time has come. Repent for the kingdom of God/heaven is near," is on both their lips. A first-time hearer of the gospels would be in no doubt that the kingdom, whatever that meant, was what this man Jesus (whom some claimed to be God's son) was all about, and that the response demanded was a moral change.

K. The Keys of the Kingdom?

MT 16:18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

If you enter St Peter's basilica in Rome, it is indeed impressive. When you look up, all around you, in letters 6 feet high, Jesus' words to Peter are inscribed in Latin all around the building. "Tu es Petrus etc". They do not look that large because they are very high, but there is no doubting the importance of this Scripture to the papacy. All around Rome, when you see a statue of a man with a beard and keys, you know it is Peter. In the paintings in the Sistine Chapel, there is a famous picture of Jesus giving the keys to Peter.⁶⁷ In fact, Jesus is giving him two keys, one of gold, the other of a base metal. One is the key of spiritual authority, the other the key of temporal authority. The latter is the authority over the kingdoms of the earth. In medieval times, Kings feared the criticism of the Church. Even Napoleon, not himself a believer, was forced to accept that his rule would have greater authority in the eyes of France and the world if he could persuade the Pope to crown him in Notre Dame⁶⁸. Although Pius VII was reduced to being "Napoleon's chaplain", there is little doubt the stock of the papacy rose in value through the incident.

For Roman Catholics, the place of Peter's seat is a place of authority, from where bishops and priests derive their authority and the Church its doctrine. From early times, the church in Rome claimed to be as a source of a river of true doctrine. Other churches like Alexandria objected: Christ's truth came through all the apostolic seats. However, when Pope Leo, Bishop of Rome (461AD) delivered his 'Tome' at the Council of Ephesus, it was greeted with "Peter has spoken". This is generally regarded as being the start of Roman papal dominance. From there it grew, leading to the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition and the sale of indulgences – all officially authorised by the vicar of Christ, the Pope. Legitimacy for all these abuses is claimed to flow from this one simple promise by Jesus.

*"The kingdom of heaven was inaugurated on earth by Christ... The Church is the seed and beginning of this kingdom. Its keys are entrusted to Peter."*⁶⁹

Whatever Jesus meant may adequately be fulfilled by Peter's role in the leadership of the earliest church. I say earliest because before long (Gal 2) there is a triumvirate of those 'reputed to be pillars': Peter, John and Jesus' brother James. If anybody had an authoritative role at the close of the NT, better claimants of the role would be Paul or Jesus' brother James.

The Catholic view is not biblically warranted, although Peter does have a leading role.

⁶⁶ I would not call the Kingdom the "one and only message of Jesus", but it would be easy to draw this conclusion from Jesus' remarkable statement of his purpose in Luke 4:43

⁶⁷ Pietro Perugino, Christ giving the keys to Peter

⁶⁸ December 2, 1804.

⁶⁹ Catholic Catechism, para. 567

“Jesus anticipates a new stage in the experience of his disciples in which Peter will exercise a significant leadership. There is no hint in the context [of Matt 16:18] that this is an official leadership that Peter can pass on to his successors.”⁷⁰

A second, humorous, view is that of Peter as the gatekeeper, telling jokes and letting the most unlikely people in.

A third, common view in the Churches of Christ has been that Peter’s opening speeches in Acts 2 and in Acts 10 are special moments in which Jesus’ words were fulfilled. He opened the gate to salvation with his message, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Both passages are ringed with the Holy Spirit’s activity. Luke wants us to notice them too. Peter is prominent in both.

Some have been taught (ironically like the Catholics) that Peter was given two keys! Douglas Jacoby deals with this well.

“I have been taught that in Matthew 16 Peter was given the keys (plural), and used one in Acts 2 for the Jews then the other in Acts 10 to open the door for the Gentiles. I am confused because in Acts 8 (I realize the Samaritans were part Jewish, part Gentle) it is Philip who baptizes the mixed race of the Samaritans, and also who seems to me to be the first Gentile the Ethiopian Eunuch. If Gentiles were converted before Acts 10, then what is the second key Peter is holding?”

In fact, Jesus never says what, if anything, the “keys” represent. Normally keys represent access, control, or freedom. (See Isaiah 22:22, Luke 11:52, Revelation 3:7.) Indeed, Peter is the one who opens up shop on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). And, yes, he was the one preaching as the Caesareans were admitted to the kingdom in Acts 10. Yet to insist on one “Jewish key” and one “Gentile key” is fanciful, and will lead to contradiction. After all, he was not opening up two kingdoms, but one. The door was opened wide starting in 30 AD. It is important in biblical interpretation not to over-interpret passages.⁷¹

Personally I do consider Acts 2:38-40 to occupy a special place in the book of Acts and to be a formulation to which Luke directs his readers. Of these three views, I prefer the third, but I agree with Douglas Jacoby that passages should not be over-interpreted.

Furthermore, after Jesus promised to Peter the keys of the kingdom, why does Peter (or Luke, commenting on the situation in Acts) not use this designation from Jesus to assist at the Council of Jerusalem? Had everyone overlooked it? Or did they think it failed to speak to the situation? Both the Roman Catholic Church and the ICOC have set great store by the promise of the Keys, although any evidence from NT writers that Peter understood his role as the key-holder in the way either the RC or the ICOC have interpreted it is curiously absent.

L. The subject of the Lord’s Prayer

A look at the Lord’s Prayer may help us further. The tendency of the ICOC is to read it as though Jesus wanted us to pray for the “Kingdom” to come. Any capital ‘K’ of course is not in the original, nor in my NIV. We know this was a prayer for the disciples, rather than for him.⁷² For one thing, it contained a request for forgiveness for sins, which was hardly appropriate for Jesus!

If it was for the disciples, it reads naturally as “May you reign here”. If this makes little sense, then understanding the common Jewish practice of repeating the same sentiment, expressed

⁷⁰ Ladd, p. 110

⁷¹ www.douglasjacoby.com, Q&A 0647 - Keys of the Kingdom

⁷² John 17 is probably more deserving of the title.

slightly differently will help us. It means the same thing as “may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

In fact, the general prayer for God’s will to be done is at odds with the earlier phrase if Jesus is teaching them during his lifetime, to pray for the church to arrive. And, moreover, the arrival of the church, like the incarnation of Jesus, is something that is in God’s timetable alone! We may pray, “Lord Jesus, come soon”, but we are nowhere told to pray for Jesus to come back, as though he might be having second thoughts. He promised to!! In a similar way, if the kingdom coming was about the beginning of the church, Jesus would not have told his disciples to pray for it. Such an event was fixed in God’s mind, like the incarnation!

A look at the familiar ending of the Lord’s Prayer may also serve to make the point.

“If ‘the kingdom of God’ means ‘God being king’, then to abbreviate it to ‘the kingdom’ is to focus on the wrong one of the two nouns. To speak of ‘kingship’ without saying who is king is to speak only in a vague abstraction which can have no specific reference in itself. ‘The kingdom’ is about as meaningless as ‘the will’ or ‘the power’ used alone without a reference to whose will or power is in view. To make the point in terms of a familiar biblical text, ‘Yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory’ (Matt 6:13) does not mean that there are antecedent self-existent things called ‘the kingdom’, ‘the power’ and ‘the glory’, which have come into God’s possession. It means simply, ‘You are the king, you wield power, and you are glorious.’ It is a statement about God, not about ‘the kingdom’”⁷³

M. The Mystery⁷⁴ of the gospels

It was no mystery for the Jews that the kingdom of God would finally be consummated in awesome power. Jesus did and said nothing to contradict that.

What was surprising was that the kingdom was to come in two stages. It would ‘draw near’ in the middle of time. This was the ‘mystery’ of the kingdom that was given to the disciples (Mark 4:11-12).

“The new truth, now given to men by revelation in the person and mission of Jesus, is that the Kingdom that is to come finally in apocalyptic power... has in fact entered the world in advance in a hidden form to work secretly within and among men.”⁷⁵

The disciples experienced fulfilment without consummation. Jesus was not surprised by this and taught as much through his parables, particularly that group in Matthew 13 that begin ‘the kingdom of heaven is like...’⁷⁶

For example, *“the parable of the mustard seed illustrates the truth that the Kingdom, which one day will be a great tree, is already present in the world in a tiny insignificant form... The parable of the tares further illustrates the mystery of the Kingdom i.e. its hidden, unexpected presence in the world.”⁷⁷*

The OT prophets, from their vantage point, could not see the interval that would exist. They just saw a period of God’s rule coming – they did not know it would come in two stages, “in the

⁷³ France, p. 13

⁷⁴ I am not confusing this point with the secrecy motif in Mark discussed by Wrede et al.

⁷⁵ Ladd, p. 94

⁷⁶ Contra A. Schweitzer. He held that Jesus expected the apocalyptic and final advent of the kingdom of God with power in his lifetime and died on the cross a broken and frustrated man. Hence his cry of forsakenness.

⁷⁷ Ladd, pp 95, 96

middle of time”, as it has done. Because of this, Jesus’ ministry did not seem to be the coming of the kingdom the Jews were expecting.

“The coming of the Kingdom would mean a complete change in the order of things. The present evil order of the world and of society would be utterly displaced by the Kingdom of God. The problem was that Jesus’ ministry initiated no such transformation. He preached the presence of the kingdom of God, but the world went on as before. How then could this be the kingdom? ... The idea of the Kingdom of God conquering the world by a gradual permeation and inner transformation was utterly foreign to Jewish thought.”⁷⁸

N. Not the Church (nor any other specific, identifiable organisation)

JN 18:36 Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

The kingdom of God never needs be defended because it is spiritual. In contrast, it is very hard for anyone to mount a sustained defence of a particular family of churches or denomination. Thankfully we never have to defend an organisation (although some of us tried very hard!). Jesus never wanted us to have to. If it was increasingly hard to defend the claims of the ICOC, it is because we were not supposed to⁷⁹.

The temptation to identify or set up a specific organisation as an earthly “Kingdom” is very strong but should be resisted. (John 6:15)

LK 17:20 Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation,²¹ nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."

This is another warning against claiming to ‘own’ the “kingdom”. “Modern-day movement of God” is better left as a verdict of history than being pronounced by a member (let alone leader) of the group.⁸⁰ This is not to deny that the claim may, by God’s grace, be true of a particular group at a particular time in history – but if the Jews in the gospels (and others in Church History) have claimed the Crown Jewels or the Title Deeds to the Kingdom for themselves, and been wrong, what do we learn? Would it not be wiser as well as biblical to leave such a verdict to others – ***more than that, to leave it to God himself?***

Even the understanding of the early Christians meant they did not claim to be “the kingdom of God”. For NT writers, the church is the new Israel and the new people of God, and the heir of the promises given to Israel, but it is never called ‘the kingdom of God’. Is it not wrong to use this phrase to describe ourselves if the early church did not?

Why did the earliest church not claim to be the kingdom of God? The answer is simple. Nobody of whom we are aware in the early church believed the church *was* the kingdom of God. To simplify it:

- The church was only part of the kingdom of God.
- The church was the community of those who believed in the kingdom of God.

⁷⁸ Ladd, p. 99

⁷⁹ We are condemned if we are “ashamed of me and my words” according to Jesus. (Luke 19:26) On similarly safe ground, Paul refused to boast except in Christ. (Gal 6:14). The church is to be loved and cherished because of Whose it is, not because of its own intrinsic merit.

⁸⁰ “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips.” (Prov 27:2)

- The church was not itself the kingdom of God.

George Eldon Ladd summarises the contrast well.

*“In summary, while there is an inseparable relationship between **the Kingdom and the church, they are not to be identified.** The Kingdom takes its point of departure from God, the church from men. The Kingdom is God’s reign and the realm in which the blessings of his reign are experienced; the church is the fellowship of those who have experienced God’s reign and entered into the enjoyment of its blessings. The Kingdom creates the church, works through the church, and is proclaimed in the world by the church. There can be no Kingdom without a church – those who have acknowledged God’s rule – and there can be no church without God’s Kingdom; but they remain two distinguishable concepts: the rule of God and the fellowship of men.”⁸¹*

O. The Old Testament bridged with the New

MT 21:43 “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. ⁴⁴ He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”

MT 8:10 When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. ¹¹ I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. ¹² But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Jesus was the King of the Jews, yet the Kingdom was not to be a Kingdom composed solely of Jews. The Kingdom was the hope of the Jews, yet Jesus was to be King of Gentiles two in one body.

These passages would be deeply troubling to the Jews. Yet they show the kingdom of God (in the sense of those within God’s favour) initially contained just Jews. With Jesus the kingdom was to remain, but unbelieving members (= subjects, citizens) would be thrown out, while others will “take their places”.

“To the ungodly Jewish leaders Christ said, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you...” For the kingdom of God to be ‘taken away’ from them meant that in some sense they ‘had’ the kingdom. They were the ‘natural branches’ (and compare Romans 9:3-5)”⁸²

The meaning of the kingdom of God was therefore being turned in a new direction for the Jews. The axis on which it turned was Jesus. He was the Messiah and the son of David coming to take David’s throne, and his death, resurrection and ascension was: -

“the enthronement of the Davidic king, the Messiah! The enthronement of the Messiah was not the enthronement of God! He was, always had been and always would be King. The enthronement of the Messiah was an act of the sovereign Lord in restoring the royal authority to the Davidic line.”⁸³

Through Jesus, the Kingdom of God is fulfilled for the Jews but proclaimed for the Gentiles.

Conclusion

⁸¹ Ladd, p. 119

⁸² McGuiggan, p. 61

⁸³ McGuiggan, p. 59

So what difference did Jesus make?

How could the kingdom of God be near (Mark 1:15) or ‘come with power’ (Mark 9:1) in the lifetime of Jesus’ hearers if it had been there ‘since before the creation of the world’ (Matt 25:34)?

- The Jews’ favoured status within God’s reign was extended in Jesus to the Gentiles.
- God’s gracious initiative to the sinner (both Jew and Gentile) has been demonstrated in Christ.⁸⁴
- The Jews’ hope was forever fulfilled in the enthronement of Messiah. David’s throne is no longer empty. The reign now only awaits consummation.
- Ultimate victory is a given for those who persevere

The early church believed this period of Christ’s reigning had arrived! Dead persons being raised, both ‘saints’ like Tabitha and the young man Eutychus; extraordinary love shown to the needy and to one’s enemies; unity between Jews and Gentiles such as had never been seen before in the ancient world; the changed lives of people like Saul/Paul; supernatural manifestations of the Spirit’s power, including miraculous healings, men being struck blind and escape from snake-bite; an entire industry collapsing in Ephesus and by 125 AD the temples in Bithynia being closed for lack of public interest due to the growth of Christianity.

The sufferings of the early church are also well known. Even in 1 Thessalonians Paul makes a side-reference to “distress and persecutions” – they were all too common. In the OT too, people suffered unfairly. But what commentators remark on is the note of triumph running through the NT that is missing from the OT! Pagan powers were still pagan powers, the temple was still corrupt, the wicked flourished financially while the righteous suffered. However, while the OT looks forward to God’s vindication, the NT speaks and sounds as though vindication is assured and indeed has already been paid for! This is what it means to live in the new world order, under the reign and rule of Christ the King!

⁸⁴ “In fact, God had entered into history in a way and to a degree not known by the prophets. The fulfilment of the OT promises was taking place; the messianic salvation was present; the Kingdom of God had come near. God was visiting his people. In Jesus, God has taken the initiative to seek out the sinner, to bring lost men into the blessing of his reign. He was, in short, the seeking God... Jewish scholars admit that this concern for the sinner was something new... The heart of the “good news” about the Kingdom is that God has taken the initiative to seek and to save that which was lost.” (Ladd, pp 82, 83)

Chapter IV: Towards a doctrine of a confessing⁸⁵ church

Introductory Matters

First, it must be emphasized that one's church and one's personal salvation may be related, but not necessarily. With a significant number of ICOC members worshipping elsewhere, this is no longer a theoretical distinction. However, it remains a hot topic.⁸⁶

Of course, membership of a particular group does not guarantee salvation, e.g. R.C, ICOC. These considerations necessitate a distinguishing of the Visible church (i.e. the human organisations) and the Invisible church (the community of the redeemed on earth). Confusing the two leads to many pastoral issues, e.g. pruning, cutting the fringe, clean-outs etc.

Jesus assumed a church, but did not leave us a set of bullet-points, a creed, four spiritual laws or an ABC. (Whether he would disapprove of the following attempts to provide definition must also be considered a possibility.)

The gospel is that Christ died for our sins. Those who trust in him will inherit the kingdom.⁸⁷ None of what follows is to detract from the gospel. The question is rather what the church will look like if it is Christian. **The gospel presupposes some knowledge of Jesus and his teaching. How will a person trust in Christ? Will there not be some necessary commonality in lifestyle, focus, belief and practice among such people?**

⁸⁵ The confessing church was the church that stood against Nazism in Germany. Most of the churches in Germany went along with Hitler. The phrase 'confessing church' is attractive because it does not carry the elitist connotations of the 'one true church' – but still makes it clear that not everything that calls itself 'church' is 'church'. It speaks of sacrifice. The confessing church takes a stand against the flow. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 20th century martyr and writer of "The cost of discipleship" was a Pastor in this church.

⁸⁶ www. Douglasjacoby.org, question 86 in the archived Q&A.

"Is there really only one true church? What does the Bible say?"

Ephesians 1:22-23 teaches that the church is the body of Christ. It is not an institution. No one has monopolized it. Yes, Eph 4:4 says there is one body. Jesus is the head, we are the body. There can only be one church. The answer to your question, then, is Yes. But one may ask, Who is in this church? Rather than ask "Who's right?", I believe it is important to ask, "What's right?" After all, God is the judge and his word contains the criteria. A good place to begin would be Eph 4:3-6, a passage which contains "the seven unities"—non-negotiable essentials of the faith. So what are these fundamentals?

- One body—one universal body of Christ, to which all true Christians belong (Eph 2:16, 3:6, 4:4, 4:25; Col 3:15).
- One Spirit—the Holy Spirit. Can the spirit prevailing in our church(es) rightly be called "holy"?
- One hope—the hope the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, so often attested to in scripture (e.g. Acts 23:6).
- One Lord—Jesus Christ, allegiance to whom is imperative (Lk 6:46), and who will brook no rivals (Lk 16:13).
- One faith—the pure faith of the original gospel message (Jude 3).
- One baptism—the immersion preached ever since the beginning of the church (Acts 2:38).
- One God and Father. And throughout scripture he has made it crystal clear that polytheism and idolatry prevent us from ever knowing him (e.g. Galatians 5:21).

Moving from the what to the who, there are indeed a handful of church groups holding firmly to these unities. We may be in a very small minority, but we are not alone. Why not resurrect the old Restoration slogan: "Christians only, but not the only Christians"?

⁸⁷ See e.g. 1 Cor 15:1-4, John 3:16. Interestingly, 'kingdom' and 'eternal life' seem to be interchangeable. The one enjoying the kingdom is enjoying the eternal life that starts now (John 17:3) The Rich Young Ruler in Mark 10 wants to know how to inherit eternal life. When he goes away, Jesus says, three times in as many sentences, how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. In John 3, what is on offer to Nicodemus is the kingdom of God; but within a few verses the promise for those who believe is eternal life. **The gospel is not about forgiveness of sins; it is about being rescued now into the sphere of God's governance – the kingdom** (Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*, p. 97)

An outline of this Chapter is as follows:-

1. The proposal. A proposed commonality (or ‘workable core’ of belief and practice)
2. Was there ever such a workable core in the NT?
3. Amplification of baptism, love and discipleship
4. Shibboleths: what has been left out
5. Concluding Comments and a vision for the future

1. The proposal

The confessing church will have: -

1. certain distinct and necessary beliefs – see the apostles’ creed
2. certain distinctly Christian rituals: baptism and communion.
3. certain distinct and necessary ethics – notably love and forgiveness and discipleship.

2. Was there ever a ‘workable core’?

“Hold on to the traditions which you were taught, whether through what we said or through our letter.” (2 Thess 2:15)

2 Thessalonians is one of the earliest written NT documents, quite likely the second. This passage bears witness to the existence of a ‘rule of faith’, an irreducible core of Christianity which existed in NT times⁸⁸. Many requirements were added (and some things taken away) in subsequent decades and centuries. However, Paul refers to some Christian tradition, not yet 20 years old, which had been formulated and was common to all true apostolic churches. This is what N.T. Wright, Bishop of Durham says in his commentary on this very verse.

“Here Paul is quite clear: the safety-rope consists of the ‘traditions you were taught’, that is, the foundational Christian teachings which he gave them when he was with them, and then by letter.

“We know from his various writings what these were. He frequently refers back to them, as for instance in 1 Corinthians chapters 11 (about the Eucharist) and 15 (the basic gospel message itself). Often he says ‘you will remember’ or ‘you know, don’t you’ reminding his hearers of teaching they have already received (e.g. Romans 6:3) These teachings are about three things in particular: the basic facts of the gospel; the central acts of the worshipping church, such as baptism and Eucharist; and the fundamental principles of Christian behaviour, particularly the mutual support he calls agape, ‘love’. Hold on tight to these, he says, and you won’t go far wrong. This is as true today as it was in the first century.”⁸⁹

There was therefore a workable core to which we are instructed by Paul to ‘hold on’. Why? Did Paul and others think “it does not really matter if you hold to them or not, because the only thing that really counts is the gospel”?

Since these were not bullet points laid down by Jesus, humility is required in the application (hermeneutics) of this workable core.

⁸⁸ See also Jude v. 3, 2 Tim 1:3, 1:14, 2:2, 3:10, 4:1-4, Eph 4:20-24, 2 Thess 1:8, 1 Cor 15:1-5, Col 4:7

⁸⁹ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone Galatians and Thessalonians*, SPCK London 2002, p. 150

3. Amplification of the Proposal

3A. Certain distinct and necessary beliefs.

The Apostles' Creed is contained in the Appendices. Of course Christianity is more than head belief – but it is not less. True faith believes certain facts, trusts the promises and obeys the commands.

3B. Certain distinctly Christian rituals.

Are there not certain distinctly Christian rituals? A trip to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem will remind you of the many branches of Christianity which exist and what they all have in common. Conversely, the “Christian-ness” of groups such as the Quakers or Salvation Army who do not have these things must be questioned. Some of these rituals are held sacred by all branches of Christianity, but are practiced in different ways. We must make allowance.

Ephesians 4:4-6 must be carefully interpreted. Paul's purpose was not to establish a particular type of baptism to be regarded as crucial to the ‘traditions’. This was not in issue. Instead, Paul was pleading for unity of the believers (see Eph 4:1 – “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit...”) This plea was grounded in certain things they had, in practice, in common at that time. Variant baptismal declarations were already creeping in⁹⁰, but Paul's plea is based on one common experience of being baptised into the name of Jesus. If this were right, it would be abhorrent to Paul to find this passage used to justify Christian separation on the basis of different practices of baptism.

On this note, we must question both method (e.g. infant baptism, immersion, pouring) and the Cognisance point. Alexander Campbell certainly did not believe he was beginning or restarting God's kingdom with the Restoration Movement. He disagreed strongly with a fellow Restorationist, John Thomas of Richmond Virginia (who was later to found the Christadelphians.) Thomas was an early proponent of the cognisance requirement for baptism which was to become standard belief for the ICOC – contra Campbell.

Campbell wrote thus to Thomas:

*“Why on all your definitions of the kingdom, supposing, as you do, that he that is not formally and understandingly immersed for the remission of his sins cannot enter into his kingdom; and it being a fact that before the year 1823, since the fifth century, baptism for the remission of sins was not preached, and not until the year 1827 were many immersed with this apprehension of the subject... either the promises of God have failed, or such persons as were baptized as you were the first time, are in the kingdom!”*⁹¹

On another occasion, Alexander Campbell, the ‘founder’ of Stone-Campbell movement, was asked his view on the possibility of salvation of the unimmersed who were nevertheless ‘baptised’ within their tradition as babies (called “Pedobaptists” in the quote).

“ I cannot, therefore, make any one duty the standard of Christian state or character, not even immersion into the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in my heart regard all that have been sprinkled in infancy without their own knowledge and consent, as aliens from Christ and the well-grounded hope of heaven ...

⁹⁰ e.g. Acts 8:37, missing in some early manuscripts.

⁹¹ Alexander Campbell, “Susan,” *Millennial Harbinger* 6 (September 1835), 418

*“Should I find a Pedobaptist more intelligent in the Christian Scriptures, more spiritually-minded and more devoted to the Lord than a Baptist, or one immersed on a profession of the ancient faith, I could not hesitate a moment in giving the preference of my heart to him that loveth most. Still I will be asked, **How do I know that any one loves my Master but by his obedience to his commandments? I answer, In no other way. But mark, I do not substitute obedience to one commandment, for universal or even for general obedience.** And should I see a sectarian Baptist or a Pedobaptist **more spiritually-minded, more generally conformed to the requisition of the Messiah, than one who precisely acquiesces with me in the theory or practice of immersion as I teach, doubtless the former rather than the latter, would have my cordial approbation and love as a Christian.** So I judge, and so I feel. It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves and this does not consist in being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far known.”⁹²*

The other ritual I have suggested is the communion. It is sad that on such matters, Luther considered his fellow reformer and comrade in the struggle against the oppression of the Catholic Church, Ulrich Zwingli, to be outside Christ’s grace. Luther wrote about his relations with Zwingli to his wife, that “we would not call them brothers or members of Christ, although we wish them well.”

Does this not seem bizarre to you, that such fine reformers, faced by such intransigent opposition as the Catholic church, should fall out so severely on the matter of the presence of Christ in the elements of the communion? Will differences between the ICOC and other immersing groups not seem similarly laughable in a few years’ time?

3C. Certain distinct and necessary ethics: love and forgiveness, and discipleship

I hope the least controversial part of this definitions process will be the position that love and forgiveness are distinctly Christian qualities. It would not seem necessary to cite particular verses in support.⁹³ Is it better expressed than in Jesus’ teaching on loving your enemies? Is it better illustrated than in his own words from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do?”

A man was once stopped at night at a roadblock in Northern Ireland during the troubles by a man wearing a balaclava. A gun was thrust through the window. “Are you Catholic or Protestant?” Relieved, the man replied, “Neither, I am an atheist.” The gun was jammed in further. “Is that a Catholic atheist or a Protestant atheist?”

The danger of sectarianism is that a person can lose their right to belong to the kingdom in what he believes to be his defence of it. The following are two further illustrations.

“I was walking across a bridge one day and I saw a man about to jump. I said, ‘Stop, don’t do it.’ ‘Why shouldn’t I?’ he asked. ‘Well, are you a Christian?’ I asked. He said: ‘Yes.’ I said, ‘Me too. Are you Catholic or Protestant?’ ‘Protestant.’ ‘Me too. Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?’ ‘Baptist.’ ‘Wow, me too. Are you Baptist church of God or Baptist church of the Lord?’ ‘Baptist Church of God.’ ‘Me too. Are you original Baptist Church of God or are you reformed Baptist Church of God?’ ‘Reformed.’ ‘Me too. Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?’ He said, ‘Reformation of 1915.’ I said: ‘Die, heretic scum,’ and pushed him off.”⁹⁴

Vinoba Bhave was the best-known disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, who died in 1999. He founded the Bhoodan movement, by which rich landowners were asked voluntarily to give up land for redistribution

⁹² Alexander Campbell, “Any Christians Among Protestant Parties?” *Millennial Harbinger* (1837) p. 412

⁹³ John 13:34, 35, 1 John 3:16 and 1 John 4:20-21 come immediately to mind.

⁹⁴ Emo Phillips, quoted in the Independent and reported in *The Week*, Issue 517, 25 June 2005, p. 10

among the poor in India. He was asked shortly before he died, "Have you any message for the Christian churches?" He held up 3 fingers and said, "Yes.

1. love one another
2. love your neighbour as yourself
3. love your enemies.⁹⁵

The following is a positive example. Festo Kivengere was a Ugandan evangelist and Anglican bishop who survived Idi Amin's reign of terror 1971-1978. He died in 1988. In 1977 he wrote this shocking article in a Christian magazine.

*"I love Idi Amin. I have never been his enemy... Is it surprising that I love him? It shouldn't be. This is a purely Christian response to the tragic events of recent weeks. It is not weakness, nor is it cowardice. Remember Christ. Forgiveness is creative. Retaliation is destructive. Love can heal, and I will be committed to that until I die."*⁹⁶

If we struggle with recognising such love as a hallmark of membership in Christ's church, we should consider in what ways we really differ from the Pharisees. They made, for example, Sabbath observance grounds for saying of Jesus, "We know this man is a sinner" and for saying Jesus' work was of the devil. They claimed biblical authority for their positions.

3D. Discipleship

(i) Discipleship as apprenticeship rather than commitment.

By discipleship I mean Apprenticeship; an intention to be like Jesus.

It is not 100% commitment (although being Jesus' disciple will involve it). It is not self-denial or abstinence (although both will be required). It is not discipling or shepherding (although discipleship will produce security and humility in our relationships).

It is about direction, not speed.⁹⁷ It is radical and will involve commitment because of necessity it seeks, "Not my will but thine." However, commitment will be of no value to the doer if the motive is not for Christ. (Cf 1 Cor 13:1-4, Romans 14:23) Commitment per se is therefore never the issue.⁹⁸ To make it so is to introduce the worst kind of legalism and 'measuring up'.

Classic commitment/obedience verses such as Matthew 7:21-23, Luke 6:46, Luke 18:14 should be read in terms of their challenge to 'direction', not speed or effort. Luke 9 & 14 (the cost of discipleship) should not be read as pre-conditions or hoops, so much as statements by Jesus of what will be encountered by the one who will follow him.

Leaders must realise if their meetings are not inspiring, Christians are allowed not to attend! Their commitment is not to a certain number of meetings; it is to become more like Christ.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Quoted in John Stott, *People my Teachers*, Candle Books 2002

⁹⁶ Christianity Today, 15 April 1977, quoted in *People my Teachers*

⁹⁷ "God does not say, 'Measure up and I will accept you' for no-one ever measures up. Rather he says, 'I will accept you in Christ and now you and I will walk and work together in my strength.'" Gordon Ferguson, *Romans: The heart set free*, Billerica 2001 p. 20

⁹⁸ When the motivation is there, commitment is never an issue. I have been amazed by the exertion of the Oxbridge rowers who work for a 'crown that will not last'. The hours, the weather conditions, the risk to one's academics all make attendance at church meetings positively sane! I am also struck by the efforts of those from the third world working multiple jobs to send money home or to get established.

⁹⁹ Self-denial may be involved. But far more important is that we are not here to build 'our' church. We want to establish the rule of God in lives and the world.

We are instructed to “walk as Jesus did” or we are a liar (1 John 2:6). Discipleship does not seek to follow Jesus’ life. That is over and was unique. It seeks to ask, “What would Jesus do if he were living my life?”¹⁰⁰ There is a difference. Women may feel a tension between self-preservation and their compassion towards certain needy men. Prayer, discussion with others and contemplation of the gospels will be required.

To avoid all doubt where I stand, I believe this IS core. The person who claims to believe but either does not want to be like Jesus, is apathetic or wilfully and as a normal pattern of behaviour chooses to live to please themselves when they know better is not Christian within the NT understanding. I believe this because of: -

- Scriptures such as those quoted above and John 13:34, 35. Is this not intended for the wider church for whom John was writing?
- Assumptions, e.g. 1 Cor 11:1 (Paul was following Christ’s example, even though he was not physically with him.) See also Eph 5:4:32-5:2, Eph 5:25
- Terminology. Even though the epistles do not use the word ‘disciple, it is the usual word for someone “in Christ” in the NT up until Acts 11:26 and beyond¹⁰¹. Doing things ‘in the name of Jesus’ (e.g. Col 3:16 and similar passages) asks how Jesus would do that thing.
- Matt 28:18, where Jesus clearly commands both disciple-making (rather than converts or simply witnessing) and expects a programme for training post-baptism.

(ii) Discipleship and the evangelical dilemma

“[In the] light of the disappearance of the kingdom and Jesus the teacher, ... the making of converts, or church members, has become the mandatory goal of church ministers – if even that – while the making of disciples is pushed to the very margins

“Non-discipleship is the elephant in the church.”¹⁰²

Discipleship is an attitude of student-ship that accepts hermeneutical differences. For example, a Catholic may recognise the discipleship of a charismatic, the ICOC member the discipleship of an evangelical. In spite of this flexibility, evangelicals have more difficulty with making apprenticeship to Christ core to the church¹⁰³ than Roman Catholics.

“It is now generally acknowledged, as we have noted, that one can be a professing Christian and a church member in good standing without being a disciple...I want it be very clear that I am not saying only ‘true disciples’ of Jesus make it to heaven after death.”¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, discipleship is making a comeback in the religious world. Below are the words of one of the 12 evangelical leaders voted to have made the most impact on the world today in a 2005 issue of Relevant magazine.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ “To be a disciple of Jesus is, crucially, to be learning from Jesus how to do your job as Jesus himself would do it. NT language for this is to do it ‘in the name of’ Jesus.” Willard, p. 312

¹⁰¹ See, for example, Acts 14:20, 14:21, 14:28, 16:1, 18:27 etc

¹⁰² Willard, p. 329

¹⁰³ This is not surprising when it is remembered one of Luther’s mottos was “sola fide” – faith alone. (contra James 2:24 etc)

¹⁰⁴ Willard, p. 319 and p. 330

¹⁰⁵ He also happens to be my kid brother, Pete Greig. For more about the magazine, see www.relevantmagazine.com

“Let me say very clearly that I consider their message of grace to be directly from God’s heart, and we must never stop proclaiming and celebrating the fact that grace is the essence of the Gospel and the foundation of our faith. But in our generation, I believe the Holy Spirit is bringing a new word to the forefront to fill conversations and aspirations the way grace has for the last ten to twenty years. It is a word used more than twice as often as “grace” in the New Testament, and yet it is taught far less in the contemporary Church. The word is: “discipleship.”¹⁰⁶

*“Of course, there is an ever-present danger of legalism and unhealthy pietism in the Church at large, and we all need to be told to relax at times, to be reminded and re-assured of God’s love and endless mercy. But in a culture forsworn to self-gratification, the danger far greater to us than legalism is surely the tendency toward the deification of pleasure in the name of grace...**In fact, for want of a radical challenge, the Church seems to be drowning herself in a sea of shallow grace.**”¹⁰⁷*

Although they indicate a renewed emphasis, it would be a misrepresentation to say that they are evidence of a willingness to regard discipleship as part of the “workable core”. This is an issue the evangelical world has to face, and one where the ICOC may be able to help.

One problem may be that discipleship is confused with perfection. Although it is not to be encouraged, it is permissible to follow at a distance!¹⁰⁸

“Now people who are asked whether they are apprentices of a leading politician, musician or lawyer or screen writer would not need to think a second to respond... But if asked if they are good apprentices of whatever person or line of work they might well hesitate. They might say No. Or Yes. Asked if they could be better students, they would probably say yes. And all of this falls squarely within the category of being a disciple or apprentice. For to be a disciple in any area or relationship is not to be perfect.”¹⁰⁹

(iii) Discipleship and church leadership agendas

The church is to both be made up of disciples (meaning apprentices) and is to make disciples for Jesus. This will affect the agendas of church leadership groups. Dallas Willard provides helpful insight into what this might look like.

“Imagine driving past a church with a large sign in front that says, ‘We Teach All who Seriously Commit Themselves to Jesus How to do Everything He said To Do.’ If you had just been reading the gospels – especially Matthew 28:18-20 – you might think, ‘Of course, that is exactly what the founder of the church, Jesus told us to do.’

“But your second thought might be that this is a highly unusual church.... When do you suppose was the last time any group of believers or church of any kind or level had a meeting of its officials in which the topic for discussion and action was how they were going to teach their people actually to do the specific things Jesus said?”¹¹⁰

“And what about evangelism? If we have an intentional programme to make disciples, can we simultaneously intend to make converts, or ‘members’ who are not disciples?... Do we now ever have any idea of what discipleship evangelism, as we might call it, would look like?... But we emphatically reiterate that the intention to make disciples is essential. It will not happen otherwise... We would intend to make

¹⁰⁶ Pete Greig, *The Vision and the Vow*, Eastbourne 2004, p. 91

¹⁰⁷ Greig, p. 89 and p. 95

¹⁰⁸ Even though an allegorical interpretation of Peter’s following at a distance into the courtyard of the high priest makes good preaching.

¹⁰⁹ Willard, p. 309

¹¹⁰ Willard, p. 344

disciples and let converts 'happen', rather than intending to make converts and letting disciples 'happen'."¹¹¹

4. Shibboleths: What has been left out.

JDG 12:4 Jephthah then called together the men of Gilead and fought against Ephraim. The Gileadites struck them down because the Ephraimites had said, "You Gileadites are renegades from Ephraim and Manasseh."⁵ The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead asked him, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he replied, "No,"⁶ they said, "All right, say 'Shibboleth.'" If he said, "Sibboleth," because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.

It is a human characteristic to tend to tribalism of some kind. It occurs in my children's playground. Certain toys or habits make you instantly 'in' and 'cool'. Others are a guaranteed 'out'. Religious groups tend to have test-questions to establish one's orthodoxy, e.g. Do you believe in "Wimber", or "Stott", or "Ferguson"? What about "I follow Christ!" (1 Cor 1:10ff) None of us wants to be pigeonholed and labelled – yet, of necessity, we do it to others all the time.

Church history sadly is full of such "shibboleths." Additions to the 'workable core' or the earliest 'traditions' of 2 Thess are abhorrent. It is so sad when almost the first questions asked are to 'sort out' the other person. For example, Is your church growing sufficiently? Do you touch alcohol? Were you baptised in the name of Jesus, or Father, Son and Spirit?

In all humility, I will put forward a controversial list of what I believe to be abhorrent additions. If I offend everyone, the list may be close to being accurate! Many of these are good – but should not be distorted to be proofs of authenticity.

A. You can only be a Christian if: -

- You are a Roman Catholic
- Evangelism is your stated Mission
- You attend x meetings per week, give x% and your church is growing at a rate of a least x%.
- You are able to speak in tongues
- You are a creationist
- You are hot
- You voted for George Bush
- You voted against George Bush.

B. You cannot be a Christian if: -

- You have divorced and remarried
- Your church has women preachers
- You are racist
- Your church has members who are in the military
- You own slaves
- You are an executive in a multi-national corporation
- You smoke
- You drink alcohol
- You are a Roman Catholic

¹¹¹ Willard, p. 333

Scripture may justify each of these. The tricky part is as soon as you try to take the definition further than the Bible takes it. Many have attempted to provide a precise delineation of the borders of the kingdom. Anything more precise than the above is doomed to failure because it is not biblical to extrapolate further and be dogmatic. For example, is 80 degrees centigrade hot or lukewarm?

Racism is recognised as totally non-Christian now but was normal and even propagated by churches 150 years ago. Did God change? Were they all lost 150 years ago? Are we sure none of our views will be “outdated” in 150 years’ time?

A comparison of David Bercot¹¹² and Kip McKean also illustrates the difficulty. For Bercot, membership of the Kingdom requires allegiance to the “four or five laws of the kingdom [that are] some of the more challenging teachings of Jesus.”¹¹³ Obedience is required to enjoy the benefits of God’s Kingdom.¹¹⁴ They include no divorce initiated by a wife in any circumstances, pacifism and a simple lifestyle. He traces these ‘laws’ through church history.

For me as an ICOC member for 21 years, Bercot’s omission of evangelism is notable. In the ICOC, the Great Commission was made into the Greatest Commandment,¹¹⁵ and conversely most if not all of Bercot’s “four or five laws of the kingdom” were regarded as non-essentials. For us, a true Christian is a disciple (Acts 11:26). The logic is as follows: If we do not obey Jesus’ command to preach to all nations and make disciples we are lost ourselves and our churches are not true churches. This is taught from Matthew 28:18-20.¹¹⁶ (That this does not in fact belong in the “traditions” or “workable core” may be seen from a study of early Christian writings.¹¹⁷)

5. Concluding comments

Events of the last few years have forced many areas to be rethought in the ICOC. The fact is that with the dramatic slowdown in growth in the period 2000 – 2003, much was beginning to be rethought already. One result was the writing and publication of the book “Golden Rule Leadership.”

I recognise this is a highly controversial area. Rather than trying to provide all the answers, my purpose is to stimulate more biblical and humble thinking by ICOC leaders, teachers and members about these topics.

¹¹² David Bercot is a lawyer and former Jehovah’s Witness unafraid to challenge evangelical standpoints and take Jesus’ calls to obedience seriously. He is an expert in the writings of the early church and the author of “Will the real heretics please stand up?” and the editor of “A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs.”

¹¹³ David Bercot, *The Kingdom that turned the world upside down*, Tyler 2003 p. 154

¹¹⁴ Bercot, p. 13

¹¹⁵ Jesus of course said the greatest commandment was to love God with all heart, mind, soul and strength. (Matthew 22:34-40) In fact there is little or no evidence the early church saw the Great Commission as one of the “traditions” which had to be obeyed. It is notably absent from the epistles, although this may be because it was one command they took as a given.

¹¹⁶ Another such passage is Luke 11:23 “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters.” Since gathering is evangelism, the one who is not gathering is against Jesus. Can someone be said not to be a member of the Kingdom on this ground alone? The context of this passage is dealt with specifically below in the section entitled “Hard at the Centre, Soft at the edges.”

¹¹⁷ “A great deal is made in some missionary writings of The Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20... But in point of fact it is quoted very little in the writings of the second century... This is interesting, for it shows that the command was not seen as a new legalism, the duty incumbent on all Christians... Whereas, however, the precise terms of the Great Commission do not appear to have played a great part in sending the early Christians out in evangelism, the example of Christ and the sense of responsibility to him were very important.” Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Guildford 1970, p. 290

In particular I should like to see

- an abandonment of the simple and unthinking identification of the ‘Kingdom of God’ with the ICOC
- a questioning of the restorationist mindset to Scripture
- discussion on what constitutes the ‘one confessing Church’

The debate is urgent as it impacts practical matters such as:

- Does a sister dating a non-ICOC person need to be made to feel she is choosing a second best (or worse, is rejecting the faith)?
- How do you see the Lutheran Minister that you sit next to at a friend’s wedding? As someone to convert or to learn from? (Beware the shibboleth mentality!)
- Your 20 year old sister has just decided to join her University CU – are you excited or disappointed?
- On the street you meet an ex-member of the ICOC who left in 2004. Do you try and ‘restore’ him – or listen with genuine interest as he talks about his new church?

I think all in the ICOC would agree God has spoken. Where we will not agree is on what he has said. Personally, I believe God has not simply disciplined my sin – he has questioned my theology. He wants me to do more than repent. He wants me to question and learn.

5A. A vision of a confessing church working for God’s kingdom?

*“God is justice, God is love,
God is reigning from above,
God is sovereign o’er the land,
Nations bow at his command.”*

So where is God’s reign today? It takes faith to believe in God’s reigning in the extraordinary and extreme times in which we live.

- The natural disasters in this last year have been huge.¹¹⁸ Tsunami, Katrina, Niger and Pakistan. Fuel costs escalating. Global warming imminent.
- Health. MRSA, bird flu, HIV/AIDS, mad cow disease, infertility
- Wars and rumours of wars. Iraq. The prospect of a terrorist nuclear threat. Suicide bombers carried out by Britons on Britons. Darfur. Srebrenica.
- Social engineering. The Civil Partnership Act 2003 and the Mental Capacity Act 2005. Genetics and cloning.
- Wealth. Abramovitch sells oil business for £5bn to Russian government. Football players’ earnings.

Where now the reign of God?

Against this, atheism is now dead and spiritual enquiry is on the increase.¹¹⁹ There is a unique opportunity, since the Bible nowhere promises security, peace or an eternal planet. In fact, it

¹¹⁸ One British headline reminded us that there have always been such events – it is just we tend to have short memories and it is convenient to forget we are not really in control. “You could be forgiven for thinking this was the year the Earth was cursed. You would be wrong.” Daily Mail 11 October 2005.

promises quite the reverse. (Matthew 24:7-8, 2 Peter 3:3-13) To read these passages may be encouraging, like reading the label on a plant that appears to be dying and realising that in fact everything is as expected!¹²⁰ There no need to be surprised or fearful.

^{2PE 3:10} But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. ^{2PE 3:11} Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?

^{1TH 4:13} Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.

Within these momentous times, there is a coming together of a ‘confessing’ church, built on some of the principles above. I hope the discussion above will help this process and in particular the redemption and integration of the ICOC in God’s global purposes. Vatican II, 24-7 prayer¹²¹ and the alpha course are evidence of a broader movement of God in the modern day.

In the film Kingdom of Heaven, we see men journeying to Jerusalem in the 12th century to find their redemption on the hill where Jesus died. That is the place where Jesus’ reign began, but it is not where we have to go to find him. He is the King “installed on my holy hill” Zion and rules the nations with an “iron sceptre” (Psalm 2), but he rules over his favoured people of every nation, tribe and language who walk in his ways.

Who is this favoured people?

Both wild olive shoot and the olive root must grow together.

^{RO 11:15} For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.

^{RO 11:17} If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, ¹⁸ do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.

The Orthodox and Catholic churches (the root) must be united with the charismatic, the ICOC and the evangelical (the wild shoots). This kind of aspiration has been shared by many, many spiritual men, beginning with the OT prophets and Hezekiah who sought the reconciliation of the tribes of Israel. For Jew and Gentile to be united was the dream of Jesus, of Peter and of Paul. It was the vision and plea of John Wesley¹²², that from Methodism’s revival of Anglicanism, in time a reunification with the Catholics would occur and then all nations be saved (including those nations just being discovered by the West at that time).

¹¹⁹ The theme of an important article in the Spectator by Professor Alister McGrath, Principal of Wycliffe Hall, University of Oxford.

¹²⁰ The bougainvillea plant from South America has its own story! I almost killed it several times and it is a sensitive topic. However, after a glorious Summer of flowering, I was sad when it died – until I checked the label and was reassured. Then I was able to confidently assure my son likewise that everything was fine.

¹²¹ www.24-7prayer.com

¹²² During an important time in early Methodism, Wesley wrote a sermon in Dublin on April 22nd 1783 entitled “The General Spread of the Gospel.” The text for the sermon was Isaiah 11:9, which reads “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” The sermon is a remarkable document, giving an eighteenth century view of the world and its inhabitants, but it is of particular relevance as it gives insight into Wesley’s own missionary vision and how he believed the evangelisation of the world would be accomplished. More information is contained in my dissertation at Cambridge entitled “The Global Missionary Vision of the Early Methodist Movement: Reputation or Reality?”

Students of the Restoration Movement will know better than any that the plea of Alexander Campbell and his father Thomas was above all for unity. They did not want under any circumstances to start a new denomination! They were a unity movement. Their contribution was to offer a way this could be done on the basis of a particular paradigm of Scripture. They believed that Christian unity and their paradigm of Scriptural interpretation led in the same direction. Sadly they seem destined to part. **What must be acknowledged is that the Restoration Movement was born out of such longings as are expressed here.** I have mentioned some more recent expressions of the aspiration above.

How will this begin? With humility, not hostility.

The OT contains an instructive account of God's involvement in a split of 'his kingdom' Israel. In the 10th century BC, the kingdom of Israel was taken out of Solomon's hands and given to Jeroboam. Since the South (Judah) in time proved more righteous than the North (Israel), it is easily forgotten that the initial split was of God. This is what the prophet told Jeroboam.

1KI 11:34 " 'But I will not take the whole kingdom out of Solomon's hand; I have made him ruler all the days of his life for the sake of David my servant, whom I chose and who observed my commands and statutes. ³⁵ I will take the kingdom from his son's hands and give you ten tribes. ³⁶ I will give one tribe to his son so that David my servant may always have a lamp before me in Jerusalem, the city where I chose to put my Name. ³⁷ However, as for you, I will take you, and you will rule over all that your heart desires; you will be king over Israel. ³⁸ If you do whatever I command you and walk in my ways and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and commands, as David my servant did, I will be with you. I will build you a dynasty as enduring as the one I built for David and will give Israel to you. ³⁹ I will humble David's descendants because of this, but not forever.' "

This is an extraordinary and important passage for the student of church history.¹²³ Who was right? Where was the 'favoured people of God/true kingdom of Israel' during this time? It appears God had bets on both horses. It is not always wrong to break away. In fact, it was God's Will that Jeroboam left. He had God's blessing in leaving. It was because of their sin. This must be remembered by the 'root' churches.

However, the breakaway group, lacking the benefit of traditions and the temple, fell terribly and quickly. Enjoying their freedom and independence, they refused to humble themselves (with few exceptions). History records the sin of the breakaway group to be far worse than that of the parent group. This must be remembered by the 'wild olive shoot' churches.

- What was God's will? Humility by each group towards the other.
- What actually happened? Hostility.

My vision of God's kingdom in the 21st century involves a confessing church. I cannot sing or make sense of the powerful song "We are one in the Spirit", if such a church is not the one in mind.

We are one in the Spirit, We are one in the Lord,

¹²³ This is not my insight. It was the subject of an important sermon by John Henry Newman, in St Mary's University Church, Oxford, setting out the relationship between the Catholic and Anglican churches as he saw them at the time (c. 1850). He later converted to Catholicism and became Cardinal Newman many years later.

And we pray that our unity will one day be restored.¹²⁴

*We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand,
And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land.*

*We will work with each other, We will work side by side,
And we'll guard each man's dignity and crucify our pride.*

*And all praise to the Father, from whom all things come,
And all praise to Christ Jesus, his only Son,
And all praise to the Spirit who makes us one.*

*And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,
Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

¹²⁴ This line was changed to “that our unity may always be preserved” in ICOC’s Songs of the United Kingdom 3rd Edition 1999, song 522. There is tragedy and prophetic irony in the change of words. Even with the original words, this has been the hardest song for me to sing and mean on almost any level, with all the changes in the ICOC.

Appendix 1

NT References to the Kingdom of God

<u>Matthew</u>	<u>Luke</u>	<u>Mark</u>	<u>Pauline Epistles</u>	<u>Non-Pauline Epistles</u>
MT 3:2	LK 1:33	MK 1:15	AC 1:3	HEB 1:8
MT 4:17	LK 4:43	MK 3:24	AC 1:6	HEB 12:28
MT 4:23	LK 6:20	MK 4:11	AC 8:12	
MT 5:3	LK 7:28	MK 4:26	AC 14:22	JAS 2:5
MT 5:10	LK 8:1	MK 4:30	AC 19:8	
MT 5:19-20	LK 8:10	MK 6:23	AC 20:25	2PE 1:11
MT 6:10	LK 9:2	MK 9:1	AC 28:23	
MT 6:33	LK 9:11	MK 9:47	AC 28:31	REV 1:6
MT 7:21	LK 9:27	MK 10:14-15		REV 1:9
MT 8:11-12	LK 9:60	MK 10:23-25	RO 14:17	REV 5:10
MT 9:35	LK 9:62	MK 11:10		REV 11:15
MT 10:7	LK 10:9	MK 12:34	1CO 4:20	REV 12:10
MT 11:11-12	LK 10:11	MK 13:8	1CO 6:9	REV 16:10
MT 12:25-28	LK 11:2	MK 14:25	1CO 6:10	REV 17:12
MT 13:11	LK 11:17-18	MK 15:43	1CO 15:24	
MT 13:19	LK 11:20		1CO 15:50	
MT 13:24	LK 12:31-32			
MT 13:31-33	LK 13:18		GAL 5:21	
MT 13:38	LK 13:20	<u>John</u>		
MT 13:41-47	LK 13:28		EPH 2:2	
MT 13:52	LK 13:29	JN 3:3	EPH 5:5	
MT 16:19	LK 14:15	JN 3:5		
MT 16:28	LK 16:16	JN 18:36	COL 1:12	
MT 18:1-4	LK 17:20-21		COL 1:13	
MT 18:23	LK 18:16-17		COL 4:11	
MT 19:12-14	LK 18:24-25			
MT 19:23-24	LK 18:29		1TH 2:12	
MT 20:1	LK 19:11			
MT 20:21	LK 21:10		2TH 1:5	
MT 21:31	LK 21:31		2TI 4:1	
MT 21:43	LK 22:16		2TI 4:18	
MT 22:2	LK 22:18			
MT 23:13	LK 22:29-30			
MT 24:14	LK 23:42			
MT 25:1	LK 23:51			
MT 25:34				
MT 26:29				

All the references to “kingdom of heaven” are in Matthew, and it has been suggested we are dealing with at least 2 concepts - a kingdom of God and a kingdom of heaven. However, Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospels and the explanation is that he is writing to a Jewish audience accustomed to using alternative words to describe God wherever possible, out of reverence. If one is left wondering which words Jesus actually used, it will therefore be nearer to kingdom of God than to kingdom of heaven. I only say ‘nearer’ because of course whichever word he used, it was an Aramaic term, and all the evangelists were translating for us when they wrote their gospels in Greek. Arguments distinguishing between ‘kingdom of God’ and ‘kingdom of heaven’ as two different concepts in Jesus’ mind should be rejected.

Appendix 2

The Apostles' Creed.

This dates from approximately 200AD. The Nicene Creed goes into greater detail as to the nature of Christ as a result of the Arian controversy of the early 4th century. The antiquity of the Apostles' Creed is its attraction.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:
Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day He arose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.
Amen.

Appendix 3

The Kingdom of God. Study Outline by Dr R.T. Kendall¹²⁵

Definition: The kingdom of God is the realm of the unhindered Spirit.

Meaning: It is what it is like when the Holy Spirit is at home, totally and utterly unhindered in my life. Then I will exhibit all the qualities of the beatitudes; meek, poor in spirit etc.

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

- *The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' doctrine of the Holy Spirit. You do not have to mention something by name to be talking about it.*
- *The kingdom of God is never understood until the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. (See Acts 1:6 for an example of the lack of understanding.)*
- *The kingdom of God is both wider than just Church and wider than just conversion.*

1) The Monarch of the kingdom of God

- a) 1 Sam 12:12. God was monarch of OT Israel. In the NT Jesus is monarch. E.g.
- b) "Where is he born to be king of the Jews?" (Matt 2:2).
- c) Jesus replied to Pilate "You are right in saying I am a king." (Jn 18:37)
- d) "The Son of Man (=Jesus) will divide the sheep and the goats before him... Then the King will say to those on his right..." (Matt 25:34)

2) The Manifestation of the kingdom of God

- a) Imminent. Mark 1:15
- b) Invisible. Luke 19. The people thought the kingdom would "appear".
- c) Inhabitable. Matt 5:3, 19. When Jesus talked about the least or greatest in the kingdom, he implied you could be in it now.
- d) Internal. Luke 17:20,21. The kingdom is "within" or "among" you. Roman 14:17. The kingdom is about a quality of life, not external rituals.
- e) Inherited. It is what you receive after you die. Eph 5:5, 1 Cor 6:9,10, Matt 25:34.

3) The Meaning of the kingdom of God. It teaches:

- a) The Sovereignty of Christ.
 - i) Jesus is your Lord. Matt 28:18. "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me"
 - ii) Jesus chooses who enters the kingdom of God. John 5:21. Only a Sovereign has the right to choose who comes into his presence.
- b) The Salvation of Christ. Rev 12:10
- c) The Spirit of God. John 3:3-8.
 - i) Regeneration (being born again) is what God does. Entering the kingdom of God is by the action of the Holy Spirit. We need the regeneration of the Spirit, the reign and the rule of the Spirit in our lives.
 - ii) John 1:33. John the Baptist knew Jesus as the one on whom the Holy Spirit would remain. The Spirit was totally at home in Jesus. He went no further. In contrast, when we sin or compromise, the Holy Spirit flutters away.

Conclusion: When we acknowledge the Monarch, the Holy Spirit sets up his reign and rule and even comes to rest on us to the extent we let him. And to that same extent the qualities that are blessed in the Beatitudes will be found in us.

¹²⁵ The title of the Sermon was in fact "The Kingdom of Heaven", although R.T. quickly pointed out this was synonymous with the Kingdom of God. A sermon preached in Westminster Chapel, London 10/5/98.

Appendix 4

Revelation 1:6 (=5:10) and 1:9

I have proposed that the NT writers would never have thought to claim of themselves, as the church, that: “We are the Kingdom of God.” At first sight, however, these passages in Revelation in the NIV seem to suggest they did talk of themselves in this way.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father--to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

REV 1:9 I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

The book of Revelation is steeped in OT passages. The assumption should not be whether an OT passage is in view but rather what is the OT passage¹²⁶. The OT passage behind these passages about reigning in Revelation is not hard to find. It is Exodus 19:3-6.

Arguably the leading commentary on Revelation is by G.B. Caird. His translation of the Greek of 1:6 is that Jesus “*has appointed us to be a royal house of priests to his God and Father.*”

“The love of Christ... has shown itself in the once-for-all, historic act of redemption through which the church has been constituted a royal house of priests. This is the first of many instances in which John applies to the church OT descriptions of Israel (Exodus 19:6), and so expressed the belief, which he shares with other NT writers, that the church is the true people of God.... He believed that those whom Christ had released from their sins were called to be a royal house, not merely because he reigned over them as King, but because they were to share his regal authority over the nations.”¹²⁷

We therefore, as the church, are part of a reigning people sharing Christ’s rule. This is the best NT evidence for a conscious identification by the church with the kingdom of God. However, the concept appears to be a new application of an OT passage. There is still no evidence that the church was led to any conscious identification of itself with the kingdom of God by anything Jesus and the earliest apostles had taught on the subject.

Caird translates Revelation 1:9 as saying that John is a “*brother and partner in the ordeal and sovereignty and endurance which are ours in Jesus.*”

This is a reminder that the Greek word *basileia* translated kingdom is an abstract word meaning “reigning” or (here) “sovereignty.” John “*does not think of the suffering of Christ as the prelude to kingly glory; Christ reigns from the cross (Rev 1:6)... Ordeal and sovereignty are obverse and reverse of the one calling; for those who endure with Christ also reign with him, and reign in the midst of their ordeal.*”¹²⁸

There is thus again no evidence of a conscious identification, by the Church, of itself with the kingdom of God as a territorial concept. They reigned, in their suffering, with the Christ, and thereby experienced the reigning (“kingship”) of Christ; but they were not themselves “the Kingdom”.

¹²⁶ Even when the translation in question has not included a footnote or OT Scripture reference.

¹²⁷ G.B. Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, Black’s NT commentary, London 1966, p. 15

¹²⁸ Caird, p. 20

Appendix 5

Theology and the ICOC

I have every sympathy with church-builders who have an eye on the practical questions. Knowledge, unless it results in action, is of questionable value. Paul said something similar about knowledge in 1 Corinthians 13:2. I would be the first to say that different levels of knowledge and appreciation of these issues is appropriate among Christians. Life is busy, with work, jobs and children. Many will want to attend church, hear a good sermon, and have spiritual friendships alongside their personal devotional lives. Analysing doctrine or the kingdom, however interesting, will seem largely irrelevant to them.

However, there must be some who dig deeper and who “teach the teachers”. The ICOC, contra other Stone-Campbell churches, has not been known for its support of theological colleges. Knowledge alone does not build churches. Having ministry staff who had never done formal theological study was not just a fact in the ICOC – it was regarded as a strength.¹²⁹ It was proof of a practical approach to the Mission, and was undeniably ‘New Testament’ in that Jesus and the apostles did not go to Bible school. (Acts 4:13) However, the house-builder relies on good plans and geological surveys, however boring, unnecessary and a ‘waste of money’ they may seem. 9 times out of 10 they may not be required, but assumption and short cuts to quick building may result in “the house on the sand falling flat.”

My own views on changes in the ICOC in the last 3 years are very, very mixed. After the Unity Meeting in Autumn 2002 I believed there were four layers to be changed from the perspective of the UK. They were

- A. An immediate financial issue (which was sorted out quickly, but was a symptom, not a problem in itself).
- B. A controlling style of leadership.
- C. A recognition and confession of institutionalised legalism, in which any ICOC member more than a year old was likely to be both a victim and a perpetrator.
- D. The theological substructure of the restoration movement.

I believed they fed into each other from the bottom to the top. My hope was that the changes would delve right down as deep as D. I rejoiced when, after 20 years in the church, I saw the most encouraging signs ever that we would reach down to B and C. I will never forget a sermon by Mark Templer, called “No more law”, which was one of the most liberating experiences in my life. I have rarely felt so much relief, so many years of unease lifted, nor so much hope for the ICOC and what we could become for the world.

My hope was for the erection of scaffolding, for the preservation of the many fragile species of “birds nesting in the branches”, for the weak and hurting and dependent for whom the ICOC was a spiritual home and family. Once erected, I wanted to see some deep excavations taking place, and fundamental questions being asked. Rightly or wrongly, I felt Henry Kriete did not share these concerns and felt compelled to act quickly. Some of my best friends think my ‘softly, softly’ approach was wrong. A problem so deep required drastic surgery which could not be delayed. It is now irrelevant to speculate.

¹²⁹ I was the most theologically qualified member of the UK staff with only one year formal training. However I was grateful and the ICOC paid for me to study (while planting a congregation in Cambridge.)

However much Henry's letter and other discussions have dealt with our As, Bs and Cs, I am still looking forward to discussion taking place on the bottom D level. With the loss of staff, many of those I would have expected to discuss with are busy (rightly) providing for their families. Additionally there are many pastoral needs to attend to. Some have felt no choice but to leave the ICOC altogether rather than discuss. Perhaps they grew tired of waiting for the discussion. A lot has been written on the C level, notably about grace, with books by Tom Jones, Sam Laing and others, and the B level, with 'servant' groups replacing leadership groups. The International Teachers' Seminars I have attended have not dug as deep as I would have liked. A well-respected brother and I were asked to lead a seminar at one on the relationship between faith, grace and works. Only one hour was allocated, and the overwhelming feeling in the group was that we had barely begun to even acknowledge the problems of the relationships between grace and discipleship that exist.

However, this is a matter for the average church member and not just the teacher, for the reasons stated in Chapter IV. I hope these thoughts on the kingdom of God can stimulate further discussion and at the very least a change in terminology.

In terms of timing, one should not forever ignore a 'biblical' matter if one claims the name Christian. Nevertheless the book of Ecclesiastes tells us there is a time and a place for everything. To use a maritime analogy, there are times it is safer to stay in port (as Paul told the centurion in Acts 27:9-11).

Life in the ICOC changed significantly in 2003. "World sectors" separated, much central funding ended and many employees of the church were surplus to the requirements of the congregations. There was a flurry of papers and articles (after a relative dearth of free thinking for some years) if not a storm in some places. The waters have now subsided somewhat. Now is a better time for a ship to venture out of port, and for proper consideration of 'biblical' matters affecting the ICOC.