

The Kingdom of God in Today's Mission Theology – A Controversy. PART ONE

Colleagues,

This is a book review—and then again it is not. It is a jeremiad about what passes for “the Kingdom of God” in much of today’s mission theology—and then again it is not. For besides Jeremiah for its plaintive parts, ThTh 369 draws on Isaiah for its positive pitch. That positive pitch is to refill the Kingdom of God wineskin with its original NT “new wine” and to do so Isaianically. To wit, with God’s Suffering Servant, a.k.a Jesus, and the agenda spelled out in the very prose of Isaiah 53. In a sentence the positive pitch is this: The Kingdom of God is Jesus’ own mission to close the gap between God and sinners. For a second sentence, here’s how it happens: as God’s sweet-swapper he is “wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (NRSV Is. 53:5). Some of you readers may wonder: Is there really any fuss about this? Mission theology folks (technical name: missiologists) know there is. Widespread missiological opinion these days sees the Kingdom of God as (mostly) something else. So, if interested, read on.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

CONSTANTS IN CONTEXT: A THEOLOGY OF MISSION FOR TODAY, By Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2004. Pp.xxii, 488. Paperback \$30.

They've hijacked the Kingdom of God. Not just Bevans & Schroeder in this new text on mission theology. They're not alone. They actually speak for a broad consensus in missiology today—across the ecumenical spectrum from the Roman Catholic heritage of Bevans/Schroeder, through today's mainline Protestantism—many Lutherans too (sob!)—all the way over to the Mennonites. And their book is already widely regarded as “classic,” the textbook for missiology in the 21st century. In my judgment it is “classically” wrong.

Here's my thesis:

The Kingdom of God (aka Rule, Realm or Reign of God) that is the hub of this book's mission theology is NOT the Kingdom of God [hereafter KoG] proclaimed in the New Testament. The KoG in the NT is God's own “regime-change,” centered in God's forgiving sinners for Christ's sake, instead of “counting trespasses,” as Paul portrays God's “old” regime, an absolutely just regime that was no forgiveness at all, but fairly and squarely paid out the wages of sin. The KoG offered in Constants in Contexts is not this good news for the global God-problem of the human race.

Instead KoG is portrayed as God's own project to restore creation toward the paradigm of mythic Eden, to make the world a better place to live in, “peace and justice” being the major mantra. There is no God-disconnect that needs fixing in this kingdom, at least, no serious one. If that ever was the focus for God's new regime in Christ, it is no longer. Instead KoG

nowadays addresses the dog-eat-dog disconnect of people with each other and with the creation at large, plus the principalities and powers that reinforce such global in-justice and un-peace. That is where the KoG is not yet. That is what the KoG's agenda is for today—and that is where this missional theology proposes to bring it to pass.

So I use the harsh word hijacked. It seems to me that the original KoG has been hijacked like a semi on the interstate highway. The 18-wheeler continues down the road with the same "KoG" logo on the trailer, but the original cargo inside—a.k.a. the original Gospel—has been off-loaded for something else, an "other" Gospel than the Isaianic one cited above.

Not that this "other" Gospel is in itself bad news. Far from it. Peace among peoples, justice for all, caring for creation is indeed good and godly stuff. But it's not the Isaianic agenda that Jesus (consciously, according to the NT witness) assumed. It's not what is labelled KoG anywhere [I'll be brash] in the NT. In Lutheran lingo, this "other loading" for the KoG semi is God's left-hand regime, God's word and work in the old creation to preserve it from chaos and to render life live-able. Yes, it is God's own operation—call it God's kingdom (realm, reign, regime—if you wish)—and humans are enlisted as co-workers—but it is not the KoG that Jesus is all about. He says so in the Gospels—in his kingdom conversation with Pilate (John's gospel), to fractious brothers and to his justice-thirsty disciples (Luke), and elsewhere. "Not my job," he says.

But when Jesus in his very first words in Mark's Gospel speaks of the Kingdom of God whose "time" has come, he's pointing at something else, something much more radical in God's own operations. Something new, brand new, that is "at hand" when HIS "Kingdom of God is at hand." Jesus's KoG is a different, blessedly different, regime. In God's left-hand regime, for all

its blessed benefits, sinners still wind up dead. The wages of sin get paid out to the sinners. In God's new regime in Jesus, they don't. If that's not "regime-change"—on God's part—then nothing is.

For all its benefits, God's left-hand regime has no resources for healing the planet-wide malady of humankind's God-disconnect, labelled in the language of the Augsburg Confession as our "sickness of origin." And what is that? That "since the fall of Adam we all enter the world NOT fearing God, NOT trusting in God and are (instead) constitutionally curved into ourselves." For this God's prior regime has no therapy.

But this grim diagnosis IS addressed full-force in God's NEW regime that came in Jesus, what he himself (on the eve of his death) called God's NEW covenant, God's new deal "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." To get sinners forgiven "necessitates" a crucified and risen Messiah. Forgiveness of sinners is NOT God's standard operating procedure ("son metier," as Heinrich Heine mockingly labelled it). Justice, so touted in the hijacked kingdom, is God's standard operating procedure with sinners according to the Bible. And apart from any regime-change, the results of divine justice are lethal. The last thing sinners should plead for from God is justice.

Forgiveness of sinners is costly grace—it cost God the death of a beloved son. There is no report of God ever having ventured such a regime before. Promised, yes. See Isaiah 53. But promise not fulfilled until the Suffering Servant appeared in the flesh. That constitutes a brand new regime—not just different, but at its core the very opposite of God's normal regime with sinners. That is the uniform message of the NT—from Matthew's first-chapter angel ["he will save his people from their sins"] to the pierced Lamb on the throne in the final chapter of the last book in the NT.

It gives me no joy to say so, but this is patently hidden in the hijacked KoG and the “other” Gospel now carrying the logo. I’ll try to show below that the apostle’s verdict in Galatians about the “other” Gospel which was spooking their congregation brings the same grim consequences today. When this Suffering Servant is not needed for the agenda that he (and he alone, so Christians say) can manage, then Christ died in vain.

They’ve hijacked the Kingdom of God. That’s a strong statement, and today’s majority opinion in mission theology will be just as strong in saying “no way!” So it’s not just Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder (no relation to this reviewer). They have a broad ecumenical fan club. Their book is getting upbeat reviews across the board in the missiological world. And both Steve and Roger [hereafter S&R] are friends of mine, frequent debate partners in recent years in the American Society of Missiology and its global counterpart, the International Association for Mission Studies.

Our debates are regularly focused on this very point: Is the Kingdom of God proclaimed in the New Testament centered in the forgiveness of sinners (and all the effort it took for Christ to make it happen), or is God’s new regime in Christ the “larger agenda” of transforming the fractured world into an eschatological Eden of peace, justice and the integrity of creation?

One side of our debate is exegesis—interpreting the NT texts that speak of the kingdom of God. The other side, also exegetically based, of course, is about the Gospel. How good, how new, is the Good News of forgiveness for sinners that came into our world when Jesus arrived? The fact that “forgiveness of sins” does not appear in the index of Constants in Context—Steve himself called that to my attention—indicates who’s on which side in these conversations.

Roger and Steve are Roman Catholic missiologists—competent scholars at the top of the charts in the ecumenical collegium. Although I shall seek to show the “arch-Roman” center of their mission theology below, they propose to speak for a broad ecumenical consensus in mission theology today. The validity of that intent, to speak for a consensus across the ecumenical spectrum, was signalled in the April 2005 issue of the International Bulletin of Missionary Research. Here six reviewers—yes, six, that’s how important the IBMR editor considers the book to be—from six different traditions in today’s Christian world evaluated their work.

The six traditions chosen are “interesting”—Anabaptist, Conciliar (=current catch-all term in the missiological world for all folks from churches in the World Council of Churches, in this case, a Presbyterian reviewer), Evangelical, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic. [N.B., Lutheran was not one of them. Lutherans come in under the “conciliar” rubric. But that label gives no theological specifics as the other five labels clearly do.]

All 6 reviewers were congratulatory. Only the Evangelical and Pentecostal reviewers added a caveat or two. The Evangelical’s complaint: “It is unsettling that stream A [of the three streams of theology which S&R trace through the church’s 2000-year history—(A) conservative, (B) liberal, (C) liberationist. More on this below]—the stream of theology this reviewer represents—is characterized by the term ‘law’ and that stream B (the liberal stream) is characterized by the word ‘truth.’ ... Being labelled law-focused in the light of the grace offered in the New Testament makes stream A appear out of touch with its message.”

The Pentecostal reviewer rejoiced that Pentecostal missiology (finally) got specific consideration in a major work in the

field. But he noted that S&R's own mission theology, the book's last 100 pages, which they label "prophetic dialogue" (a "stream C" for the 21st century—liberation and transformation). had little to say about Pentecostal "concern for the perishing multitudes that have yet to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ."

"Constants" is one of the two big words in S&R's title. Which raises the question: just what are the "constants" for mission theology? Deep down, that is what these two reviewers are asking about with their caveats. For S&R the constants are 6-fold. Every mission theology—in each age of the church's history (six by their count)—addresses 6 constants: christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, salvation, anthropology, and culture. The core of their book (208 pages) traces these six constants through each of the church's ages. Of course, the content poured into each of these 6 constants has varied—sometimes widely—by virtue of the contexts (the other "big word") impinging on this age's mission.

But S&R give scant attention to evaluating the contents poured into these constants. E.g., checking them for their own "constancy" in terms of NT specs. They do often identify if the constants of any age are closer to A or B or C theology types (conservative, liberal, liberationist)—and A-types frequently do not get good press. But not much more critical analysis is given of the wine in these wineskins.

Which brings us back to the Pentecostal and Evangelical reviewers. They are asking about a different sort of "constant" for mission. Not a category that inevitably gets attention in mission theology, but a content, a "constant" content, that must (?) be present if the mission theology is to qualify as Christian. Both of these reviewers highlight THE "constant" that is at the very center of the Christian enterprise: "the

grace offered in the New Testament” and “the Good News of Jesus Christ.”

Just what is this Grace, what is this Good News? Whether these two reviewers noticed it or not, their caveats are linked to the fact that S&R have different wine in the “Grace” and “Good News” wineskins, different from what these wineskins hold in evangelical and pentecostal theology. And different too from the Lutheran Reformation heritage. And that, of course, eventually entails the claim, “different from what these wineskins hold in the witness of the NT.”

Here is the jugular for conversation with S&R.

What is the Gospel? What is that Kingdom of God that came in Jesus the Christ? And, of course, behind those two questions the never-absent one of hermeneutics: how do you read the Bible? S&R draw on their Roman Catholic tradition for addressing such questions. But they are not antiquarians; their fundamental theology is patently spiced with contemporary proposals for Missio Dei, a liberationist Reign of God, and a Christocentric universalism, all of which can be read within that tradition.

So my opting for the Lutheran Reformation—and doing mission theology according to that compass—is no more or less parochial.

But there just WAS a serious disagreement in the 16th century in the Latin church about the answers to these questions. And scholasticism (Thomas included) and Luther were on opposite sides of the fence in this inner-catholic debate. No surprise then if S&R and I (and a Pentecostal—wow!—and an Evangelical—wow again!) find ourselves across the fence from each other. Even in our very different contexts from that of these classic ancient theologians.

The debate is about the substance of the Grace and Gospel “constants.”

Luther’s Aha! about the Gospel of justification, he said, was that in a nutshell the Good News is “the forgiveness of sins.” And that is what the Gospel of the Kingdom of God is all about too. Here’s one citation of many: “You should learn that Christian justification, whatever you may think or imagine, is nothing but the forgiveness of sins, which means that [God’s kingdom] is such a kingdom or sovereignty as deals only with sins and with such overflowing grace as takes away all wrath. ...Apart from forgiveness there is and remains nothing but sin which condemns us.” [Sermon from 1529].

If forgiveness of sins is not even listed in the index of Constants in Context (and rightly so, since it plays no role in the book—even in the few references to Luther’s mission theology), then it is patently not a “constant” for S&R’s “theology of mission fortoday.”

The difference centers in the “agenda” that is predicated to Gospel and to KoG. What does the Gospel itself do? What is happening when the KoG is taking place? Lutherans read the NT and see those two terms as synonyms. And the agenda for both is getting sinners un-sinned—and keeping them that way. Getting the God-disconnect of sinners healed—and keeping it healed. Getting unfaith-full God-distrusters to become faith-full God-trusters—and keeping them that way. Faith means “trust” in NT vocabulary, not only Paul’s but John’s as well—and regularly in the synoptic Gospels too. Faith is trusting Christ, a trust focused on his promise of forgiveness.

Lutheran theology, and thus Lutheran missiology too, builds on that forgiveness-Gospel. Once more it seems “perfectly clear” in the fundamental NT mission texts. Take a look:

Luke's mission mandate (24:47): "that repentance and the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his [Christ's] name to all nations."

Or John's Christology cum mission mandate: "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (chapter 1)... As the Father sent me, so send I you. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them—and if you don't do it, it won't happen." (chapter 20)

Or Luke's report of Paul's words in Acts 13:39: "By this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses."

And also St. Matthew's classic Great Commission (28:18ff), beginning with Christ's claim of authority, is forgiveness-focused when you note that Matthew centers Jesus' authority in "the Son of Man's authority to forgive sins." (Matt. 9:6) Thus to "make [Christ-] disciples of all nations" is for existing disciples to replicate Matt.9, since because of Christ "God has given this authority to human beings."

Forgiveness of sins is a—if not the—central constant of the Gospel. S&R's mission theology thinks otherwise. We've "discussed" this more than once in our table-talk at conferences. I cannot comprehend why are they disinterested in something so basic, so constant, so perfectly clear, in NT mission theology.

And the same goes for Kingdom of God. If it is indeed God's own regime-change with sinners, then the two terms are nearly synonyms. The old regime—justice-based—was "wages of sin" payoff. Forgiven sinners don't show up at the end of that pipeline. It is only God's regime in Christ—that is the scandalous Christian claim—where sinners come out alive at the end. To establish that regime to the ends of the earth is

Christ's mission mandate. Forgiveness of sins is the Christian "constant" for every mission "context."

Nowadays in missiology—at least academic and published missiology—all the hype is on "context." Even Lutherans are souped up about it. Witness the conference recently announced for this fall at the biggest ELCA seminary—Luther Seminary, St. Paul MN—on "The Missional Church in Context—a consultation on developing a contextual missiology."

Though some of Seminex's brightest and best are on the program as major speakers, and the newly-chosen "missional" president of the seminary, also a Seminex grad, will hover over the consultation, I wish they were focused elsewhere. The deep malaise of church life in the USA is not inattention to contexts. It is inattention to content. Even worse ABSENCE of THE constant, the Gospel of THE Kingdom of God, that vitiates church life today in our midst. It's 16th century Europe all over again—ecclesia semper reformanda—the church needing reforming at the core. It's Gospel-absence, Gospel-ignorance. And in the place of the missing Gospel, other gospels have rushed in—seven-fold. And as Jesus once said: the last state of the victim is worse than the first.

What's needed for Mission theology in the 21st century—and for the fading life of wide swatches of the church in the USA—is clarity about what the KoG really is—and isn't. Both on the street and in the academy other Gospels abound. Winsome as they may be, they are competitors to the regime-change that God was in Christ enacting, "reconciling the world to himself, not counting trespasses, but making him to be sin who knew no sin so that we might become the righteousness of God." (2Cor.5).

Someone once called to my attention that Paul doesn't talk about forgiveness of sinners here, nor much anywhere else. OK.

But he is talking about sin here—as he does 57 other times by my count in his epistles. For the regime-changing remedy what language does he use? What does he do? He ups the ante, goes into hyperbole. In 2 Cor. 5 it's commercial language: reckoning, reconciling, accounts.

Instead of charging sin to the sinner's account—God's otherwise standard-operating-procedure.—God puts it to the account of the sinless one. And that one's assets go to the account of the sinful one. At the end of the sweet-swap exchange sinners get credited with the righteousness OF GOD. That's forgiveness with a twist! Frosting on the cake. Former sinners now walking around with God's own righteousness laced into our DNA. That really ups the ante on forgiveness.

Better said: that signals what's involved—what all's involved—in the forgiveness transaction. Not simply: "OK, you had a bad track record; now that Christ has done his bit, it's all gone." But "you had a lethal God-disconnect; now Christ has sweet-swapped you for that. And IN HIM (note where the former sinner's new God-connect is located) you ARE the righteousness of God."

For so many, I'm told, that sounds so old hat. Depends on who you talk to. A psychiatrist I know tells me: "Ed, at least half of the people who come to my office want their sins forgiven." Recently an Air Force chaplain told us: "I work with a psychiatrist on base who gives me the razz about 'just making folks feel guilty' with my ministry. You've got that wrong, I tell her. They know they're guilty, that's why they come to me. I have God's forgiveness to offer them. Do you have anything like that?"

D.V., PART TWO NEXT WEEK.

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