

The Baptist Faith and Message:

IX. The Kingdom

The Kingdom of God includes both His general sovereignty over the universe and His particular kingship over men who willfully acknowledge Him as King. Particularly the Kingdom is the realm of salvation into which men enter by trustful, childlike commitment to Jesus Christ. Christians ought to pray and to labor that the Kingdom may come and God's will be done on earth. The full consummation of the Kingdom awaits the return of Jesus Christ and the end of this age.

This section of the BF&M attempts, in a few words, to express what is “the Kingdom of God.” In many cases, the earliest version of the BF&M presents a clearer and more theologically stout expression of Baptist beliefs than the later versions. The section on the kingdom of God is an exception. The 1963 version improved on the 1925 version and the 1963 wording was left unaltered for the present BF&M 2000. The difference is so striking that it is worth quoting the 1925 version in its entirety as follows:

The Kingdom of God is the reign of God in the heart and life of the individual in every human relationship, and in every form and institution of organized human society. The chief means for promoting the Kingdom of God on earth are preaching the gospel of Christ, and teaching the principles of righteousness contained therein. The Kingdom of God will be complete when every thought and will of man shall be brought into captivity to the will of Christ. And it is the duty of all Christ's people to pray and labor continually that his Kingdom may come and his will be done on earth as it is done in heaven.

A section specifically addressing “the Kingdom of God” is not typical of the confessions of faith from which the BF&M would have borrowed language or used as an exemplar. The verbiage is not in the New Hampshire Confession or other predecessor Baptist (or non-Baptist) confessions. Thus, this section and its language in the 1925 BF&M may very likely be original to it. Maybe the section on the Kingdom of God was included to rebut modernism which viewed Darwinian evolutionary processes sovereign in the physical creation. Because the section on The Kingdom in the 1925 version has been largely revised not many words will be expended on it. The first sentence of this section in the 1925 version was probably the motivation for the revision in 1963.

The Kingdom of God is the reign of God in the heart and life of the individual in every human relationship, and in every form and institution of organized human society. The meaning of this sentence hinges on how one understands “the individual.” If it is taken as written, God could be understood to be reigning in the hearts of all humans whether they believe in Him or not. It suggests that the Kingdom of God includes everything and everyone over which He is sovereign. Immediately, theological problems arise with this interpretation. The Scriptures clearly teach that in no sense is the Kingdom of God totally inclusive to all humanity and all human institutions, but is exclusive to believers only. Knowing that Dr. Edgar Young Mullins, second president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was intimately involved in the crafting of the original BF&M, it would be surprising if a theologian of his stature and learning would ever intentionally teach that the Kingdom of God is coextensive with all humanity. His body of theological writings certainly does not advance such a concept. Therefore, in all probability, the intent was that “the individual” should be implicitly understood to mean “the Christian.” With that view, most of the problems in the passage immediately evaporate. Moving on to the BF&M 2000....

The Kingdom of God includes both His general sovereignty over the universe and His particular kingship over men who willfully acknowledge Him as King.

The current BF&M states that the Kingdom of God includes His general sovereignty over the universe. From a logical perspective this makes sense. God rules over His creation and is the Sovereign King of the universe. So, by logical inference, the Kingdom of God must be

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coextensive with the universe. However, because the Bible teaches that the Kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom, the physical universe is not the “Kingdom of God” in the way that the phrase “Kingdom of God” is meant in the Biblical sense. Even though God is indisputably sovereign over the universe, the universe is not the Kingdom of God. If it were, the prophecy of its coming and Jesus’s statement that some shall not see it would not make any sense. OT Scriptures make it clear that the Kingdom of God was future and NT Scriptures say that it has come. In order to properly understand the Kingdom, all thoughts of a geo-religious kingdom with physical boundaries established by physical means must be abandoned. This thinking was the very mistake that the Jewish leaders made during Jesus’s earthly ministry: the revival of a geo-religious kingdom, Israel. Nevertheless, although the Kingdom of God is spiritual, it manifests visibly and materially in the work of the Spirit in those of us who have been born again by the Spirit.

To American Christians of our day, the idea that the Kingdom is spiritual comes naturally because one of our founding principles separated the authority of the church and the authority of the state. Unlike Europe, we have never lived in an environment where for centuries the church and state were melded together. Furthermore, the founding fathers rejected monarchism and, in so doing, rejected kings, emperors, potentates, and grand pooh-bahs. After the Revolutionary War, a strong paranoia remained that a monarchy would rise with Washington as king leading to the epithet, “monarchist.” To quell those fears and have some semblance of home life in his later years, Washington did not pursue a third term. Two terms became a traditional limit that remained unbroken until Franklin Roosevelt. However, for many centuries, beginning with Emperor Constantine, the Kingdom of God was considered geopolitical and it was expanded by military conquest. The Kingdom and the Roman Empire were coextensive. Into whatever territories the empire expanded, the populace was expected to conform to the state religion, “Christianity.” Roman Catholicism continued to use military means (e.g., the Crusades) to advance “the Kingdom.” Even after the Reformation, the idea of a geopolitical kingdom continued in the concept of the state church. Sadly, many of the Baptist principles that we hold dear were considered by the Reformers to be heretical and Baptist-thinking people were persecuted by both the Roman Catholics and the Reformers. Many were tortured or put to death.

The second clause of the sentence conveys the idea that the Kingdom is made up of believers. This begins to better capture the Biblical concept of the Kingdom. People enter the Kingdom of God by a willing faith born from a heart regenerated by the Spirit. In John 3:5-8, Jesus could not make it clearer when he explains that one must be born of the Spirit to enter the Kingdom of God. The BF&M points out that people in the Kingdom are willing believers. They are not in the Kingdom because they have been ordered to believe, had a religious rite performed on them, or because they occupy it by hereditary right.

Particularly the Kingdom is the realm of salvation into which men enter by trustful, childlike commitment to Jesus Christ.

In this statement, the BF&M affirms that the Kingdom is the realm of saved persons. Thus, the unsaved do not inhabit the Kingdom of God, even though God is still sovereign over them. The reference to trustful, childlike commitment comes from Jesus saying, “suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for such is the kingdom of God.” Jesus’s point is that people are saved by faith that trusts in Him totally as small children trust in the loving care, attention, and protection of their mother and father. Yet, it should not be interpreted that saving faith must be simplistic because there are many scriptures that teach that we are to grow in knowledge and grace.

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Christians ought to pray and to labor that the Kingdom may come and God's will be done on earth.

This statement refers to the model prayer in Jesus's "sermon on the mount": "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The 1925 version did not drop "as it is in heaven." Perhaps those who revised the 1925 version considered it unnecessary to tell Christians that God's will is always done in heaven. Any usage of "God's will" always raises the issue of His revealed will (commands, laws) versus His decretive will (eternal purpose). His decretive will is always accomplished on earth and in heaven. However, only in heaven is His revealed will always accomplished. In the prayer, "thy will" refers to both aspects of God's will.

The addition of "may" to "thy kingdom come" is unfortunate because it introduces doubt in the coming of the Kingdom. If it may come, it also may not. It is unlikely that the writer intended that meaning but simply unnecessarily added the word because it was more pleasing to his ear. If there is anything certain in this world, it is that the Kingdom will come in its totality, finality, and eternity. Our prayers and labor are absolutely essential to the coming of the Kingdom. The gospel and prayer are the means by which God has ordained to advance and consummate His Kingdom. We spread the gospel by the preaching of the Word, telling others about salvation in Jesus alone, modeling Christ to the world, taking the gospel to all the nations and our neighbors, doing good works in the name of Christ, and standing against His enemies. We labor to be a Christian witness to the world. We pray for the Kingdom to come in its full glory, just as we say "come quickly, Lord." We pray for revival to come by the work of the Holy Spirit. Throughout history, God has revived the lost from their spiritually dead condition. This kind of revival must be prayed down rather than worked up. "Ye have not, because ye ask not." Let's fervently ask, not doubting, that God would bring revival for our nation and the world.

The full consummation of the Kingdom awaits the return of Jesus Christ and the end of this age.

The Kingdom as spoken of in this section cannot be easily understood to be a millennial Kingdom in which Christ reigns bodily on earth because the Kingdom is considered to exist now and is presently awaiting full consummation. In that regard, this section does not support the dispensational understanding of the Kingdom of God as a future kingdom. Briefly, the dispensational understanding of the Kingdom of God is that it was "offered" to the Jews at the first advent of Christ and they rejected it. This rejection ushered in "the Church Age" in which the world presently exists. The Church Age is a "parenthesis" [their term] in God's plan during which the gospel goes forth to the gentiles resulting in the conversion of many and the advancement of "the Church" as we know it. Along with this is their belief that the Church will be raptured prior to a future seven year period of tribulation on earth after which Christ will bodily return to earth and reign for a thousand years. Then, the judgment will occur. In the eternal state, the Church occupies heaven and the Jews reside on earth. This, among other things, leads to their making a distinction between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven. Until the advent of dispensationalism, most Bible expositors viewed the two Biblical phrases to represent the same kingdom expressed in different terms by different NT writers. Given that the title of this section of the BF&M is "The Kingdom," in the singular, the BF&M describes only one Kingdom. Notwithstanding, the last clause, "the end of this age" [my emphasis], leaves the interpretive door open regarding one's understanding of what age is ending. Therefore, although a dispensationalist would not be completely comfortable with this section of the BF&M, it does not summarily dispense with or explicitly deny the dispensational view of the Kingdom. That being said, overall, this section describes the Kingdom of God as having been inaugurated at the first advent and awaiting consummation at His second advent.