

Mary Craig Ministries, Inc.

Series: "The Kingdom of God"



Message: "Kingdom, Church, Culture, and Structure"

[Click/tap to hear the live recording](#)

Dr. Mary Craig

June 27, 2021

Let's explore some concepts: kingdom, church, culture, and structure. The **kingdom** Jesus announced points to something greater than our own structures and ourselves. Kingdom refers to the rule of God in our hearts and relationships. This kingdom was "at hand" in Jesus as Jesus lived amid people. People were now to follow Jesus' Voice in obedience to Him and so fulfill the Law of Christ. The Law will serve as a mirror, as a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ, and, in the New Covenant, as a guide. In Christ a new relationship is established whereby the Law is written in the heart. The Holy Spirit points us in kingdom directions. The Law cannot give life. Only the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of the Father gives Life.

In the parable about not putting new wine into old wineskins, the wine symbolizes God's dynamic power infiltrating our lives. Like fresh wine, the kingdom embodies the dynamic and creative power of God's Holy Spirit. The KOG entails a new vision, a new set of values/moral ethics, and a new openness to yield to the Lord. God rules and that rule will become visible in form and practice as people follow Christ, the Good Shepherd.

The **church** is the assembly of called-out ones, people who have welcomed God's reign in their hearts and relationships. These are citizens of heaven, the body of Christ, obedient disciples following the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus, hearing and obeying His Voice. The church is not a building or institution but an invisible community of those who live by kingdom values and kingdom laws/precepts.

The visible church includes both true believers and unbelievers. In its architecture, worship, garments, design, etc. visible churches are to reflect the beauty and holiness of the Living God, seeking to have an atmosphere appropriate to the Presence of God, the One true God. In its attempt to accent relationship with the Father through Christ over institutional religion, the visible church today has been moving farther and farther away from the beauty and holiness of the Lord. God is no longer the audience in many instances, and so the common is usurping the sacredness and holiness of the Presence of the Holy Spirit. Exodus 28-30.

Culture entails the values and practices of a particular body of believers. The culture will demonstrate the views, habits, and practices they prize and which ones they reject. The ideas and values of the kingdom may take on different cultural expressions in different settings as believers try to apply the Scriptures to their time and place and people group. Lives should reflect kingdom values and Christ should impact culture. Believers are ambassadors of Christ; what we say and do and are—matters.

Structures are the social vehicles needed for people to meet their own needs and the needs of others. These would be the institutions and programs established in order to meet both social and service missions and the various other missions of the church. Structures are not the church or the kingdom but rather vehicles for doing the work of the kingdom.

The kingdom transcends the church in two ways. It existed before the beginning of the “church” and will be God’s kingly domain throughout eternity. The kingdom is larger than the church as it represents the ultimate lordship of Jesus Christ over all peoples, principalities, and powers. The church embraces the rule of God, the kingdom. The culture and structure of the church express kingdom ways and so need periodic overhaul or reform to assure they haven’t gotten away from the Word of God, straying and drifting. [drift, doubt, disbelieve, disobey, die]

The kingdom has visible social and political characteristics both in the assembly of the called out ones and in the cultures and structures created to accomplish the mission of Christ. We must ask: Is the culture of the visible church driven by the larger society or by kingdom values and priorities? The culture of the kingdom in an area must be relevant to the culture of the area but the culture of the area should not determine the culture of the kingdom. Manila and their roosters example; warehouses, inappropriate clothing, pop entertainment...When cultural rather than kingdom values craft the church’s institutional forms, the salt loses its savor.

We must always examine structures from time to time. Social structures that were at first spontaneous and fresh soon solidify and become routine. Soon they seem like the right way and then the only way. Structures want to perpetuate themselves, like maintaining an organization. Structures can calcify. So, humanly created structures are not sacred and need to be examined and reformed when necessary. Church buildings are just buildings; they are not the church. The church pulpit and altar, for example, are as mundane as other objects. They point us to spiritual meanings and may have a spiritual use, but in and of themselves, they are not sacred. And what we use for a pulpit or altar doesn’t have to come from the Church Supply Catalog to be holy. But neither are our structures to be so common and casual and perverted that they dishonor the beauty and holiness of God, His truth and righteousness. Thus we consecrate, separate the common to the holy purposes of the Living God.

Sometimes those structures designed to serve the mission of the Church start to rise up and master the people. They become more important than what they symbolize. One very large church had this motto: “Excellence in all things and all things to the glory of God.” The motto informed decisions; it should be “Love in all things and all things to the glory of God.”

The assemblies of called out ones are always caught in the tension between form and love, structure and Gospel, organization and vision. The symbols of the past threaten to become idols, like the serpent on the pole. Old rituals are not absolutes. Jesus came along and violated Sabbath rules, avoided some purity rituals, ate with sinners, and purged the temple because He came as a correction, judging structures in order to make way for a new and better covenant, a new and better worship system.

The Jubilee model of the Sabbath provided not only for rest but also for reflection. We need to take time to reflect on things like kingdom, church, culture, and structure. We need to reflect on our priorities, on where and how our time is spent, etc.

Judgment can be excruciating but it is through judgment that deliverance comes. The germ of renewal is in the process. The church reforms and gets back to the basics of the kingdom. The KOG runs on love and has peace and good at its core, not evil and violence running on hatred.

God governs by *agape* love. Agape love surpasses *eros* or passionate love, *storge* or family love, and *phileo* or brotherly love. Agape loves un-lovely, irregular people and even enemies. Compassion, generosity, forgiveness, and mercy form the essence of agape. God’s subjects in the KOG are not slaves but children. He is Abba to them, not Your Majesty. Nevertheless, He is

the Majesty on High, El Elyon, the Most High God, and we are not to lose awareness of that. Jesus referred to His Father as “Holy Father” and “Righteous Father” in John 17.

Jesus told a story about the Father’s love. This is the story of the prodigal son, but we will focus only on the father in the parable found in Luke 15:11-32.

When the younger son took his inheritance, that was okay, but culture said he was not to dispose of it while the father was living. Otherwise, it was treating the father like a corpse. Children were to honor their parents by obeying and by supporting them financially. The younger son displays gross disrespect for his father, then he leaves and squanders his inheritance so that there was nothing with which to support his father if necessary. Then the son ends up tending swine, a work prohibited and considered the abode of devils. The son has hit bottom.

The father could rightfully be embarrassed. The son shattered his father’s reputation, esteem, and honor and brought shame to the family. The father would not be fit for synagogue leadership and could legally disown the son.

This father does not defend himself and does not retaliate to protect his social status. He lets his son go and waits for his son to return. He doesn’t forget his son but walks down the road looking for him.

When the son “comes to himself” or repents, the son is willing to be a servant. He knows he has publicly disgraced his father and family. The son returns filthy. The father could have been cautious, investigated for details, desired justice, and wanted the son to prove himself. He could have shunned the son upon seeing his condition. But he doesn’t. He rolls out the red carpet.

He runs to his son, an action that was culturally considered wrong for an aged person. He was welcoming a rebellious son covered with dung. Then he kissed him, a symbol of forgiveness. He wipes the slate clean by doing that. Then he welcomes the son as a son, not as hired servant, for he orders garments reserved for royal guests and gives him a signet ring symbolizing authority. Slaves went barefoot; but the father gives his son shoes. Shoes were for free men. He killed a fatted calf, something reserved for special occasions = steak. There is a celebration.

The father’s forgiveness enrages the older son, who considers the forgiveness “foolish.” The older son demands justice and fairness. The older son never enters the house and refuses to join the celebration.

What is God after? Gratitude and a going and doing likewise. The prodigal represents Israel in exile that now is being restored in the ministry of Jesus. The elder son typifies the scribes and Pharisees who are resisting the in-breaking of the new kingdom in their midst. The celebration points to Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners who will be welcomed into the new kingdom upon repentance.

So what do we learn?

Agape is indiscriminate. God’s love responds to persons, not to social categories.

Agape is bold. God’s love upholds people over traditions and religious orders.

Agape is inconvenient, risky, expensive, and takes time. It jeopardizes social status.

In the world reciprocity is the norm. It shapes our expectations for giving and receiving favors, both verbal and material. Luke 6:32-34. Mt 5:46, 47. God stretches us as we seek to love as He loves.

Agape is a norm of excess. God initiates love to those who are at enmity with Him. Romans 13:8. Mt 5:45, 10:8, Luke 6:36, Mt 25:40. If we are to walk out God's love we will exceed the norm of reciprocity in three ways:

1. We will take the initiative. We may move first because God has first loved us.
2. We will serve others regardless of their status.
3. We will not expect a return because we have already been paid. Luke 14:12-14.

God in His love desires reconciliation, restoration, and return. God's love advocates for the poor and downtrodden; all have sinned and fallen short of His glory.

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Revelation 3:17 ESV

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. 1 John 3:1-3 NKJV

Agape willingly suffers and expresses loving care. God in His love gives. And remember, true believers can commit grievous sin, clearly breaking the commandments. God to a believer is not Judge but Father. He chastens and corrects when He is displeased, but the Bond of the Blood Covenant in Christ cannot be broken. 1 John 1:9. We break; God heals. The Holy Spirit is never to be underestimated.

Every day is a good time to think about God's boundless love. While we were yet enemies, Christ died for us. We were sinners, justly deserving God's wrath, and Christ paid the penalty for our sin and bore the wrath of God in our behalf. Christ did what was necessary and sufficient for us to be reconciled to God the Father; and it is God who took the initiative. We never would have. God in His love welcomes us to Himself, restores relationship, puts royal garments on us, gives us a signet ring of authority, puts the shoes of the gospel on our feet, and has a big celebration. And what are we to do with that? We love because He first loved us. We are to be grateful and express that gratitude by seeking the grace to love as we have been loved. Amen.

Bibliography: Kraybill, Donald B. *The Upside-Down Kingdom* Herald Press, 2011.

Ladd, George Eldon. *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1959.

Mary Craig, D. Min.

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you:
and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judæa, and in Samaria,
and unto the uttermost part of the earth. Acts 1:8 KJV



Thank you for giving to MCM! Donate: Mary Craig Ministries, Inc., P. O. Box 4610, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33338-4610 or through PayPal® online at www.marycraig.org. Go to marycraig.org for the latest articles and words received. Take a look and see all that God is doing through this ministry, in world missions, in evangelism, the Barnabas Project, Craighouse® Christian Fellowship, home visitation, Kinetic Koinonia, media, and more. Worship with us 4:30 p.m. Sundays via teleconference. Reach MCM at 954-491-7270. Send in your prayer requests. Follow MCM Bible teachings and Rev. Jim Craig's sermons; go to www.marycraig.org and click on "Audio Bible Studies" or "*Divine Appointment*" radio ministry; or go to www.mcmtffr.org for audio sermons, teachings, and handout sheets. Free. Go to www.marycraigverses.org for "Enjoying God for Life," daily encouragement and growing in your faith. Go to www.marycraig.smugmug.com for some pictures of MCM world missions.

See our new Mary Craig Ministries YouTube Channel here:
www.youtube.com/channel/UCs4c-InXmh2HKF36huJQTOA. Subscribe for free.

Free books by Dr. Craig to download, print, or just open and use, here: www.marycraig.org/Catalog.htm .

Mary Craig Ministries, Inc. is a USA 501 (C) (3) nonprofit corporation founded in 1993. Federal ID 65-0429517.