

Science and the Kingdom of God

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A quick introduction to me and where I am coming from.

I have been a believer for over 36 years. I am a scientist by training, an engineer by practice and a theologian by calling.

It was whilst I was doing my MA that I wanted to do something on Kingdom Theology and Science for my dissertation, but an extensive literature search did not turn up a definition of Kingdom Theology.

So I went with "What is Kingdom Theology?" The result was three definitions – two of which are very similar and we will come to the better one of the two in a minute.

During this time I produced two talks, "Kingdom Theology – towards a definition" and "Kingdom Theology and the unity of Knowledge". It was in the second of these that I first presented a model of the Kingdom, inevitably people were more interested in the model than in the unity of knowledge. The model comes soon!

This talk is based upon the one I gave in Cambodia as part of the training I provided out there earlier this year with Mission Direct.

I have attempted to produce a workable definition of Kingdom Theology in less than 200 words :

Creation is, was, and always will be part of God's Kingdom. The perfection of God's Kingdom was spoilt by sin. At precisely the right time, the Kingdom of God was announced and instantiated in the teaching and ministry of God's Son, Jesus Christ, who came into the world to proclaim God's Kingdom and to die for us on the cross. In so doing he washed away our sin, which separated us from God, destroyed the power of death and rescued the created order. As a consequence, God's Holy Spirit is able to in-dwell all those who repent and accept who Jesus is and his sacrifice for them, empowering them to begin to live as though God's Kingdom has been completely restored - which it will be when Jesus returns. This life involves engaging in God's work by walking in the way of Jesus through an understanding of the scriptures in their context and by applying them to today in order to bring hope, salvation, healing, freedom from oppression, reconciliation, joy, peace, creativity and untold blessings for humanity and the earth.

Although there are those who might be happier with a shorter, snappier version like ...

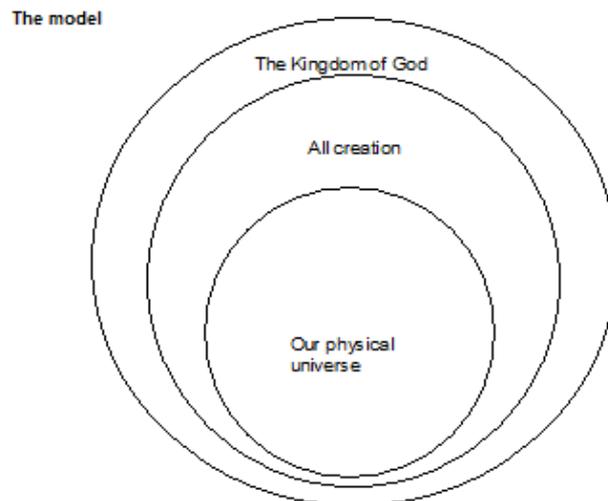
Everything belongs to God, but nothing is as it should be. When we recognise this and what God did and is doing through Jesus, we can start to be changed into what we should be and start to live in God's power, as He wants us to be.

The Shape of the Kingdom

Introduction

At the 2015 Theology Conference organised by Westminster Theological Centre I presented a paper entitled Kingdom Theology and the Unity of Knowledge.¹ In order to explain the link between my definition of Kingdom Theology and the unity of knowledge, I developed and presented a model of the Kingdom of God. Inevitably, there was more interest in the model than there was in unity of knowledge! This was unfortunate, but only in the sense that the main thrust of the paper was towards the unity of knowledge and the importance of that unity. There were some questions concerning the model and it was apparent that some further development was not only possible, but that it was also necessary, especially a testing of the model against the scriptures. This paper attempts to do that development and testing.

The Basic Model



The Kingdom of God
Outside time and eternal Peter 3:8

From my definition we see that Creation is part of the Kingdom of God. From the scriptures we know that not all creation is visible to us. Hence, our physical universe, which is where we can work out how things work and what we describe as nature exists. Science is limited to Our Physical Universe. Alister McGrath says of this, 'Nature can be interpreted in a theistic or in an atheistic way – but demands neither of these. Both are genuine possibilities for science.'²

¹ Vine M. K. *Kingdom Theology and the Unity of Knowledge*

² McGrath, Alister, and Collicut McGrath, Joanna *The Dawkins Delusion* (London: SPCK, 2007) 13

Divide between our physical universe and the rest of creation

Romans 8:19-21



We need to remember that Creation is currently flawed and longing to be remade (Romans 8:19-21), suggesting firstly that the dichotomy between our physical universe and the rest of creation results from sin. Secondly this suggests that any knowledge about creation is marred but as Derek Stanesby says, 'Science is a human activity; so is religion.'³ Implying that there should be continuity between the two.

Not a Venn diagram



Not a Venn diagram

Moving inwards represents a simplification rather than anything else.

Better a representation of a multi-dimensional array

The first two points I want to make about this model concern its interpretation:

1. It is not a reflection of God – do not see Father, Son, and Holy Spirit here. There is, however, a unity to the Kingdom of God, which reflects the unity of our God.
2. The shapes are irrelevant. I have, however, deliberately placed Our Physical Universe towards the bottom – if only to accommodate the scriptures which describe people as going up to heaven!

The model does look like a Venn diagram (Set theory); with the physical universe as a sub-set of the whole of creation. Normally sub-sets are more complex than the full set – our model is the other way around, with reducing complexity as you move in. I feel the model is

³ Stanesby, Derek *Science, Reason and Religion*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1988) 196

better described in terms of a multi-dimensional array. We are three-dimensional beings, although we have problems working in three dimensions (the best place to hide something is just above head height) and most people have difficulty with four-dimensional arrays.

Despite this, there does seem to be more dimensions as we move up from our physical universe, through the rest of creation to the totality of the Kingdom of God.

A word of warning, this suggestion of a multi-dimensional universe model might appear to give support for parallel universes. Firstly, there is no support for these universes in scripture and, secondly, that is also driving this analogy too far.

Testing

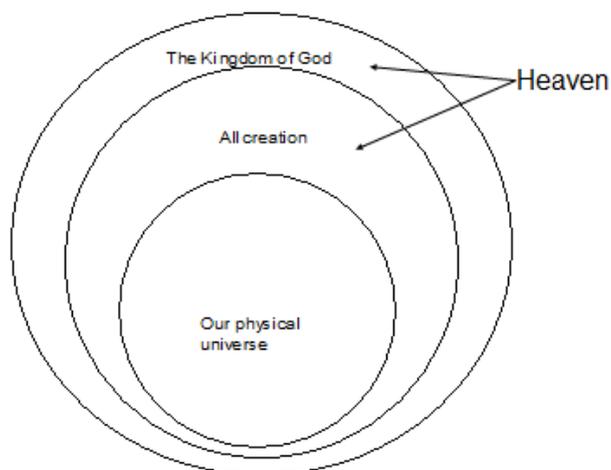
The purpose of testing

The main purpose of testing of any model is to look for holes, flaws, or imperfections in it. I started certain that these were there, but knowing that we need to ask whether these are fatal or transformational. In other words can they be remedied, do they destroy the model, or are they just to be acknowledged?

The questions asked were:

- Where is heaven? – This was amongst the questions asked at the conference.
- What about time? – Surely it is not limited to our physical universe.
- Where is hell? – A difficult question which is not strictly germane to Kingdom Theology, but is one we cannot ignore.
- Are the boundaries real or imaginary? How do they affect us?

Where is heaven?



We know that creation includes the heavens (Gen 1:1), meaning that heaven is part of creation; but it would also appear that there is access to a higher level, where God sits in glory, so it would seem to be straightforward that Heaven is where God is and where there is no sin. This gives this shape to the model:

All creation - Our physical universe - The Kingdom of God – Heaven

If this view of the model is correct, then it implies that there will be different levels of heaven, certainly this is implied by Genesis 1:1 but it is also implied by Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 12: 2-4) 'I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven'. Paul goes on to describe this as paradise. The notion of heaven having layers or levels or of there being more than one heaven is well attested in other New Testament writings (Luke 21: 26; Eph 4:10; Col 1: 16, 20; 2 Peter 3:5, 7, 10, 12-13) and is also found in other ancient literature.^{4,5}

Enns identifies three ways that the word heaven is used in the Bible:

- The atmosphere, e.g. Deut 33:13, Job 26:13 and 38:29, 1 Sam 2:10, Isa 55:10,
- The celestial realm or space – the abode of the sun, moon, stars, and planets (Gen 1:14).
- The dwelling place of God – which is probably what Paul referred to as the "third heaven"⁶

Whilst this explanation would also explain Hebrews 4: 14; Ephesians 4: 10; Hebrews 7:6, it does smack of a reading back of modern understanding into the scriptures and so we need to ask, what would have been the understanding at the time of writing of these passages? I do not believe Enns' interpretation to be correct.

All Creation is Subject to Time

Time is not a dimension; Christianity exists in time which is linear and not cyclical. Although this is perhaps too obvious to need stating, it is a fundamental characteristic of Christianity which sees a distinctive beginning and end to history. God, however, is outside time. As C.S.Lewis explains, we have difficulty with this idea because we live in time, which is linear and so start and finish are terms we can understand and we easily accept that everything has a distinct start (creation) and finish (the Parousia). That is also time for the whole of creation, which will be remade when Jesus returns. All creation is subject to time, only God is outside time, and Creation has a beginning (Gen 1:1) and an end.⁷ 'All creation groans, waiting for the full glory of the church' (Romans 8: 19-24).

For God this is not so, suggesting that the Kingdom of God is more than just co-temporal with creation and that the Kingdom of God is more than creation. This in turn implies that this creation always has been and always will be part, and only part, of God's Kingdom.⁸

As we have already seen, all creation is subject to time and has a beginning and an end. This would imply that there should be further references to time in relation to creation. Creation will be remade.

2 Peter 3: 10-13; Revelation 21:1; Isa 65: 17; 66: 22; Matt 24: 35; Mark 13: 31; Luke 21:33

We will look at this again as we look at hell later, but before that; we turn to look at what the angels know about time.

Angels and time

Angels are present throughout scripture and there are a number of different words used to define angelic beings. For those interested in reading further, Enns provides a useful Angelology in *The Moody Handbook of Theology*.⁹ We are forced to acknowledge that angels are fascinating creatures and, as such, are the subject of many books and essays. We are not talking here of the popular image given by Martin Haalaschka as 'beautiful young

⁴ p163, Vol XI, New Interpreter's Bible

⁵ Gooder, Paula R. *Only the Third Heaven? 2 Corinthians 12.1-10 and Heavenly Ascent*.

⁶ Enns, Paul *The Moody Handbook of Theology* Chicago: Moody Press, 1989, p372

⁷ Lewis, C.S. (?)

⁸ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 166-71

⁹ Enns, p287-292

female figures adorned in white garments and sustained by large wings.' which, as he points out, 'does not match the way they are imagined in biblical literature.'¹⁰ Although his statistics concerning this apply to Germany, it would be interesting to follow this up for the United Kingdom, Cambodia or any other nation represented tonight.

The most important aspect for us, however, is that angels are part of God's creation and so, although eternal, are in time.

Although angels do not experience time in the same way as we do, it would appear that they are aware of time. I draw this from Gabriel's appearances to Daniel and Luke's natal stories. Daniel's vision of 'a man dressed in linen, with a belt of finest gold around his waist' and his subsequent conversation with him related in Daniel 10 could well be Gabriel, who appears to Daniel in Daniel chapters 8 and 9 (8: 14-26; 9: 20-27). Certainly the description resembles the descriptions of heavenly envoys in Ezekiel chapters 9 and 10 (9: 2-3, 11; 10: 2, 6-7), but the commentaries focus on the heavenly struggle, which parallels the earthly one.¹¹ The descriptions 6 also parallel Revelation chapter 1 (12-16) and Ezekiel chapter 1 (26-28), both of which portray the glory of the Lord, but there is no such identification here, the being in Daniel has been sent as a messenger (verse 11) and most commentaries speak of an angel.¹² Accepting that this is an angel brings the important point that he knows that he was delayed for 21 days until Michael (one of the chief princes/archangel) arrived to help. This angel is aware of time.

Luke's natal appearances also include clear references to time.

It seems that angels do not appear to be affected by time – there are no differences in Gabriel's description between his appearances to Daniel and his New Testament appearances to Zechariah and Mary. Pascel Parente would appear to suggest that this is because angels are noncorporeal beings, who only assume a form when it is required, which could just be a nice cop out.¹³

Hell

Like heaven, the location of hell within the model does not spring out of the definition, but it is not so easily located. In fact, I did not originally include hell in the model at all.

It is tempting to put hell as a blister on the outside of the Kingdom on the basis that it was annexed by Jesus when He went down to Hades (Ref), but that fails when you ask 'where did Hell come from?' Locating hell outside the Kingdom of God denies the supremacy of God – something else must be equal with God.¹⁴ It also is accessible from within creation, 'I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it' Matt 16:18

The origin of hell is not disclosed in the Bible but it is part of creation and so it is under God's jurisdiction and part of the Kingdom of God. There are things we know:

- It is subject to time – Rev 20 – 1000 years
- Twinkling of eye all will be remade imperishable (1 Cor 15: 52) – this passage is to do with the resurrection body and not with creation.
- Hell appears to be part of the Kingdom, but separate from God. The story of Lazarus and Dives in Luke 16: 19-31, shows that there is a gulf between heaven and hell.

¹⁰ Hallaschka, Martin (2010) Zechariah's Angels: Their role in the night visions and in the redaction history of Zech 1,7-6,8, Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament, 24:1, 13-27, DOI:10.1080/09018328.2010.491599

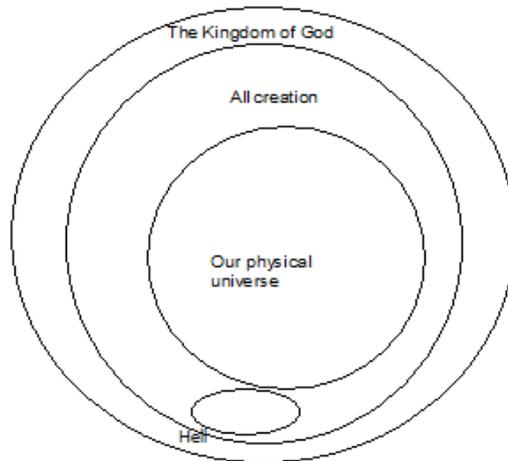
¹¹ Smith-Christopher, Daniel L., "The Book of Daniel" in Leander E. Keck, ed. *The New Interpreter's Bible Volume VII*. Nashville: Abingdon 1996

¹² Joyce Baldwin p180

¹³ Parente, Pascel P.

- There is no way out of hell apart from for God and the sons of God (The Church and the angels) unless the entities are let out by God (Revelation). Once you are in you are in for all eternity.
- It is eternal (Rev 20: 7-15) – hell does not appear to be affected when Heaven and earth pass away and are remade (Rev 21).

This suggests that hell is a discrete area within Creation, which I have included in the model like this:



All creation - Our physical universe - The Kingdom of God – Heaven - Hell

It is possible that there are different areas in hell. From Luke 12:47-48, it appears that there will be degrees of punishment in hell, although whether there are different areas would depend upon the interpretation of the different scriptural terms used to describe hell itself. This is actually beyond the discussion here and so has not been pursued.

It is possible (referring back to the different dimensional discussion earlier) that hell is part of creation, but shifted from it dimensionally. Again, this is beyond the present discussion.

Boundaries – real or imaginary?

The boundaries between the different areas of the Kingdom of God are both real and distinct, but they are not necessarily meant to be there. The boundaries between our physical universe and the rest of creation and between creation and the rest of the Kingdom of God are there as the result of sin and rebellion and will pass away at the end of time. The boundary between Hell and creation was put there by God and is eternal.

Despite this, it does appear that all internal boundaries can be passed at what the scriptures describes as gates. Ascent stories all have angels guarding each of the entrances to the next highest level of heaven.¹⁵

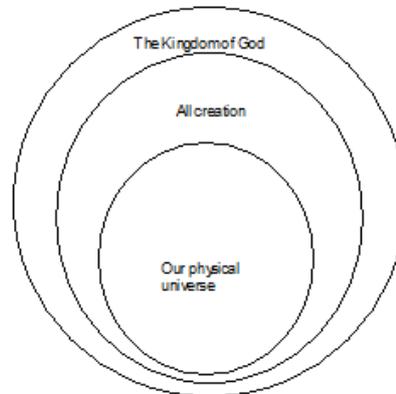
This would suggest that the mystics are right and there is more to life than what we can measure. Unfortunately, time precludes any exploration of mysticism tonight.

¹⁴ I am grateful to my friend, Chris Brown, for pointing this out when I shared the model with him at an early stage.

¹⁵ Gooder, Paula R. *Only the Third Heaven? 2 Corinthians 12.1-10 and Heavenly Ascent*.

Unity of Knowledge

Essential unity – the first thing that arises



I have demonstrated that, like our God, there is an essential unity to His Kingdom. I am not going to explore the Trinity beyond noting that the three Persons who make up our God are in perfect harmony with each other in a way we can only aspire to.

We have seen that God's Kingdom is intended to be one with its parts working and meshing together perfectly. Creation is part of that Kingdom, albeit spoilt by sin. This would indicate that knowledge about Creation (we cannot know beyond God's revelation what the Kingdom is like) should also reflect the Creator. Paul writes 'since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what was made.' (Rom 1:20), although only God is omniscient, and the rest of creation can only know about God's Kingdom in part.

For Christians the cross and the Kingdom stand united at the centre of everything that we do. This means that religion, politics, culture, theology, philosophy, science, ethics, and the many other subjects should not be divided. These subjects were not separated at the time of Jesus and should not be separated now; it is just that each subject has grown so large that is difficult for any one person to appreciate them all. On a more fundamental note, the Kingdom and the Cross are not separate but the same thing and any attempt to divide them needs to be resisted. The gospels not only bring these together, but also show them to be the opposite sides of the same coin.¹⁶ Alister McGrath says, 'the Christian doctrine of creation demands a unitary approach to knowledge.'¹⁷ From the scientific viewpoint Halford Mackinder, political geographer, would appear to agree with this when he writes, 'Knowledge is one. Its division into subjects is a concession to human weakness.'¹⁸

To sum up, just as God is One, his Kingdom is one and there is nothing it does not address.

This does raise the question over the apparent dichotomy between science and theology. Science is limited to this physical universe, which forms a part of creation, but is not all of creation, whilst theology deals with the whole of creation (albeit badly). This has been summed up by 'science does not need theology but theology needs science.' It is important to note that this dichotomy is not limited to science.

¹⁶ Wright, *How God became King*, 159f

¹⁷ Alister McGrath, in Joel B Green, *Body, Soul and Human Life* (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2008), 24

¹⁸ Halford J. Mackinder, (Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society 1887 volume 9 141-60)

Conclusions

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There are challenges to this model, amongst these are mysticism, which we could look at some detail, and hell, which is part of the Kingdom of God and so needs to be part of the model, but is not central to Kingdom Theology. I suspect that any issue is more to do with the two dimensional nature of the model's portrayal of the Kingdom rather than the model itself.

What does the Kingdom of God have to say to science?

- 1. There is a lot out there to discover.**
- 2. God has put the potential there**
- 3. We are made in His image**

This leaves us with the question, what does the Kingdom of God have to say to science?

Firstly, there is a lot out there to discover. God has put so much into our physical universe; so much potential into what so many people mistakenly call creation, that there is not enough time to unlock it all – please take that as the encouragement to explore that it is meant to be.

Secondly, God put the potential there. That means He will delight over our good new discoveries, whether that is a new rose or something as profound as graphene. The corollary to that is that He weeps over what can only be described as bad applications or discoveries. Whatever we are doing we need to be aware of and take care of what we find.

Thirdly, we are made in God's image, so we have the potential for playfulness, for creativity, for humour, for delight in the creation, to be able to focus on the job in hand, just like our heavenly Father does. Personally, I cannot imagine a better job description – to which we have to add the necessary qualifications, of course. I know that's the sort of people I would want to work with.

¹⁹ Alister McGrath, in Joel B Green, *Body, Soul and Human Life* (Bletchley: Paternoster, 2008), 24

²⁰ Halford J. Mackinder, (Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society 1887 volume 9 141-60)

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