

Perichoresis, Coinherence and the secret keys of the Kingdom in the New Testament (Jan 2006 draft)

There were two main streams within early Christianity, spiritual and communal versus hierarchical and authoritarian.

Our Western Christianity, whether or not it has had subsequent injections of spirituality, is descended from the latter. The initial spirituality of Christianity was thoroughly purged from the mainstream under the guise of ridding the church of Gnosticism.

The term 'Gnosticism' (which is incredibly difficult to pin down with a satisfactory definition beyond simply 'knowledge') is still used within mainstream Christianity as a pejorative term. It is an 'arch heresy'. If anything can be successfully labelled Gnostic, no further thought or consideration need be put into it. It can be dismissed summarily without any need of serious investigation.

Think about it. If you wanted to hide a treasure in a field, what better field could you find than that!

You don't need to be overly interested in gnosticism as such, but if you are interested in the pearl of great price, why not sell all and buy the field its in.

Sell your authority and reputation - your 'authority' to be heard by Christians, and your reputation for having something 'worthwhile' to say.

But you'll be in good company. That is exactly the position Christ put himself into on this earth. He deliberately shunned the credentials of the religious authorities of his day, and deliberately made himself of no reputation.

And he still hides his treasure in common clay pots.

St Paul's true legacy

Did you know that the oldest known commentary on the gospel of John is gnostic¹, and that the earliest Christian Gnostics claimed St Paul as their own?

The early Christian gnostics dismissed the epistles to Titus and Timothy as disinformation by the hierarchical church, a fraud to obfuscate the fact that St Paul's legitimate letters contained within them the very thing those epistles condemn². Modern textual analysis has convinced most scholars that these Gnostics were in fact right - its probable Titus and Timothy were written well after St Pauls death in about AD 60.

But if you can invoke an unquestionable authority to assert a common author, and place all the books together, people simply accept that they are by the same author, and the resultant paradigm will result in the reader skimming and missing anything that could be seen as contradictory.

1 Naassene Fragment quoted by Hippolytus Ref. 5.7.2-9 (c. 120-140) - Valentinian texts cited in Clement of Alexandria's Excerpta ex Theodotou (c. 140-160)- Valentinian Exposition to the Prologue of the Gospel of John quoted in Irenaeus' Adv. Haer. 1.8.5-6 (c. 140-160) - the commentary of Heracleon on John (c. 150-180, quoted in Origen's commentary

2 1 Tim 6:20 -21 O Timothy, guard the Deposit, avoiding profane *and* vain babblings, and oppositions of falsely-named 'gnosis', which some professing have erred concerning the faith.

This principle has been clearly defined and explained by Thomas Kuhn's paradigm theory. Things that should be clear and obvious become invisible to us if there is no context for them.³

So if we remove the brakes put on by the disinformation and take Paul's genuine quorum on its own merits we begin to see something quite spectacular. We see the supernatural theology of St Paul.

St Paul seems to be one of the few people who saw through the obfuscation of the nature of the Kingdom that had settled on the Church under the leadership of James. No matter how its spun today, St Paul was very clearly at odds with James.⁴

The general populace both then and now accepted an 'outer' interpretation of the Kingdom of God.

- that the Kingdom of God is coming soon.
- that the Kingdom of Heaven can only be experienced 'when you die'.

Saint Paul knew of course that both these statements are not false, they just don't give the full picture. St Paul knew the 'inner' truths of the Kingdom - the stuff Jesus didn't share with everybody⁵.

This brings us to another area where people miss truths.

When outer truths are placed next to inner truths, and the two don't seem to be completely complementary, people will skim the whole topic. They will do this unless they have been given a key or paradigm in which to appropriately place or interpret what they have heard or read.

People don't easily embrace paradox. You must embrace paradox if you are looking for truth. Don't embrace paradox for its own sake, embrace it because you are waiting for the key that unlocks the paradox.

We will be looking for these keys - the keys of the Kingdom.

First of all we will go through the logic of the core truths of the Kingdom that Christians have generally given mental assent to.

- **the Kingdom is coming on the basis of 'Thy Kingdom come'**⁶
- **the kingdom is here on the basis of 'the Kingdom is within you'**⁷
- **the Kingdom of heaven will be experienced when you die**

Now most Christians would probably be fully in agreement with all those statements, purely because they know the Bible passages off by heart that state those truths in as many words.

But there is a big difference between giving something mental assent and having a real knowledge of it - a 'gnosis'. But what does it mean to believe those truths?

³ (This not only happens with Pauls letters, but with the whole of the Bible! - the Bible is usually read with a paradigm that not only sees no conflict between the messages of Paul and James, but also sees a seamless unity between the Old Testament and the New Testament, and the God of love as the God of Wrath, - but that is another story!)

⁴ Gal 5:12 I wish that everyone who is upsetting you would not only get circumcised, but would cut off much more!

⁵ Mat 13:10 And the disciples said to Him, Why do You speak to them in parables? 11 He answered and said to them, Because it is given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven, but it is not given to them.

⁶ Luk 11:2 And He said to them, When you pray, say: Our Father, who is in Heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, as in Heaven, so also on the earth.

⁷ Luk 17:20 And being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered and said, The kingdom of God does not come with observation. 21 Nor shall they say, Lo here! or, behold, there! For behold, the kingdom of God is within you.

We will unpack just what experiencing the Kingdom now means, and I believe that it will freak most Christians out.

The key point we are making should begin to be come into focus when we add another statement to our core truths:

We have already died in Christ.

The Kingdom of God has on a very real level already come, and we can experience the Kingdom of heaven now, because we have died and our life is hidden with Christ in God.⁸

This is the foundation for understanding 'difficult passages' such as Paul stating.

1Co 5:3 For as being absent in body but present in spirit, 4 in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, with my spirit; also, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ;

Lets face it if we let ourselves think about this passage honestly, and not hide it in some lame religious explanation, the closest handle we can get on it would make it seem as if Paul is into astral travel!

We can fully accept God providing people with visions, dreams, and information miraculously every now and then. For that matter we can easily accept that Paul would have been shown a lot more than the rest of us. What we have difficulty here is not that, it is the fact that Paul is himself living the miraculous. The passage clearly gives an indication that this is something Paul is choosing to do himself, not something he is being shown.

Ok so how do the 'inner' truths of the Kingdom of God make sense of this?

The Mystery of the Kingdom

Many early Christian writers shrouded and hid certain 'spiritual' aspects of the faith in secrecy. These were the aspects of the faith that apparently were not considered necessary for the function of ecclesiastical and hierarchical church, which had become the dominant form of Christianity by the purge of the so called Gnostics in the Second century.

These hidden teachings concerned the 'mystery of the Kingdom' and the 'Pearl of great price'

The first step in finding something is to realise you do not have it. The best way to never find something is to believe you haven't lost it. Most believers simply gloss the term 'mystery of the Kingdom' as if its meaning was simple and self evident.

Its meaning is simple and self evident to those to whom it has been revealed, but not to those 'on the outside'.

The concept of 'Mystery' to the first readers of the gospels was nothing like our concept. A modern western reader thinks of mystery perhaps as they would a murder mystery where we have to gather clues to piece together an answer.

⁸ Col 3:2 Be mindful of things above, not on things on the earth. 3 For you died, and your life has been hidden with Christ in God.

Mystery is not something to be solved with your head, and if we seek to understand the nature of God, or the Kingdom of God, intellectually, we will miss it completely.

'Mystery' in the ancient world was a far more awesome concept, and no-one expected to bridge true mystery in and with their brain. People were initiated into mysteries, generally in psychologically disturbing ways mirroring death and rebirth. A mystery was a great deep, an awesome abyss, in which the seeker could easily be lost, a stripping off in the hope of being reborn into the new.

In the revelation of a mystery there was no sense in which this awe was minimised. The path was simply that one took the plunge into the deep with someone who had plunged before them, died within it and were reborn into a new reality - a stripping off of the old where there was no assurance of being reclothed.

Was the revelation of the mystery of the Kingdom of God any less? It certainly was not simply intellectual assent to a concept.

Clearly, Jesus of Nazareth's central message was the Kingdom of God.

Some people have criticised Christians for forgetting this and preaching the messenger and not the message. This would be a valid criticism if it were not for the fact that the messenger was both the way to the Kingdom and the one in whom the Kingdom subsists. You cannot have the Kingdom without the King.

Participation in the life of the Kingdom is intimate participation in the life of God and in the life of all who share God's life. You cannot have a King without a Kingdom.

And its here that we are provided with our first clues.

The Cappadocian Fathers and the Eastern Church - coinherence and perichoresis

Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers were from the Eastern Church, the church that later evolved into the orthodox streams - Greek, Russian, Syrian orthodox etc.

Where the Western hierarchical Church using Rome as its locus was defining the faith hierarchically and negatively - declaring certain doctrines as heretical, and defining the faith in intellectual terms to match, the Eastern Church proceeded in a different spirit.

The Eastern Church was not so quick to throw out the baby with the bath water, and its most famous sons were more spiritual than intellectual, and less interested in maintaining the organisation than what it contained. This can be seen by comparing people like the Cappadocian Fathers, Ephrem Syrus etc of the East with characters such as Ireneus, Eusebius, Augustine and Jerome of the West.⁹

The Eastern Church preserved 'difficult' truths that had been discarded by the West on the basis that they could be taken the wrong way, misconstrued, or cause offence. Interestingly they preserved a number of truths that were foundational to the Gnostics, truths hidden under such terms such as the

⁹ It is even more visible in the different way the Eastern and Western Church defined the nature of the Trinity. Augustine and Jerome provided a very hierarchical model, with one God manifesting in 3 ways. The Cappadocian Fathers put forward a model based on unity through love.

'marriage chamber' and 'singleness'

And it is in the texts of the Eastern Orthodox Church we find a pearl of great price.

When Athanasius defined the Trinity in the terms of **coinherence** and **perichoresis**, the mutual indwelling and the divine flow, he was expressing something that was not foreign to the believers of the time who 'knew' and experienced 'the mystery of the kingdom'.

What Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers did in so wonderfully expressing the unity and nature of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was to simply affirm that the nature of the Kingdom reflects the nature of the King.

In their wonderful treatises on the Trinity, these early Church fathers have served to preserve the 'keys of the kingdom' for posterity, hidden under plain view. **Coinherence and Perichoresis.**

Coinherence

Coinherence is how Paul could be spiritually present to the Corinthian Church in a real way, real enough to observe what was going on.

Coinherence or mutual indwelling is a core aspect of the Kingdom.

It works like this.

If Paul is in Christ, and Christ is present in the Corinthians gathering together, logically it makes sense that Paul is also present in the Corinthians gathering together.

For that matter if you are in Christ, are you not logically also there too?

Trouble is we don't experience that. Paul clearly did.

Paul also stated that we are seated in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. No-one is going to argue with that theologically, but again who really experiences it today?

Lets look at a few more truths from a logical point of view.

When you die and go to heaven you will be outside of time and space and in eternity in Christ, That means of course that as eternity includes our reality, there must be two of you now. One is down here locked in time and space with an awareness full of less than useful stuff, the other beholding the face of the Father in eternity.

But if Christ is in you now, and the Father is within Christ, then heaven is also within you and the eternal you is also within you worshipping God in eternity.

This may sound outrageous, but if we accept the premisses it is based on, how can we ignore where they logically lead us?

So how do we experience this?

Perichoresis

Again, the Cappadocian fathers have the answer. The Father Son and Holy Spirit not only coinhere, there is a dance of life and love between and within them - **perichoresis**. The dance of the life of God.

We cannot not see what Paul and the early Christians who had a true 'knowledge' of the Kingdom saw and 'knew' without participating in that dance. It is in that dance that we experience an awareness of our true coinherent reality in Christ.

This dance of life that exists within the Trinity is the same dance of life that exists within the Kingdom. It is this shared life and awareness that enables us to truly say that Father Son and Holy Spirit are one as they fully give their life to each other, holding nothing back.

We can only share and experience this shared life and awareness if we swap our individualistic, egocentric life for it. And this is where 'death' comes in.

We cannot experience heaven without death. You can be sure that if your ego is still functional you are not experiencing the Kingdom of God.

Modern Christianity has missed the importance of the death of the ego. We think that when St Paul says we must die to the 'flesh' or the 'old man' that he is referring to those bad parts of us that sin.

Well yes he is, but if you think that's all there is to it then forget about the Kingdom.

We are often very ashamed of the bad parts of us and we are happy to disown them and let go of them. It's the other aspects of our ego that are more insidious - the parts we think are pretty good, the parts we seek affirmation in, the parts we think justify our existence on the planet. This is what we have to die to. The bits we often hold onto with our very life.

Paul puts it pretty clearly - all the things we think are good about us are poo and tampons. They are the things that we hold onto and that fully engage our faculties. We see reality through them, and it's a pretty poverty stricken reality.

Once we are prepared to let go of those and meet Christ outside the city, then Christ will exchange our old ego life for his shared life of the Trinity and the Kingdom.

Then we will see.

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Coming next St Peter and the Keys of the Kingdom