

Unit 15 Assignment

**The Kingdom of God
and the Church**



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Assignment Unit 15

The Kingdom of God and the Church

1 Describe briefly the characteristics of a congregation you know.

Setting

Knighthorpe Methodist Church is situated in a mature suburban area of Loughborough Leics. Many new developments have been built further out of the Knighthorpe area making it half way between the town centre and the outskirts. Because of its location there is a great variety of residents, from those who moved there in the '40s and 50's and have retired there, to new families in their first house and everything in between. As a consequence the make up of the congregation is equally as mixed in age, gender and social grouping.

Character

The congregation has many varied characters for many reasons though lately they have become quite a close family of worshippers possibly due to the stresses and strains of going through a major development project together. They are very relaxed and tolerant of different styles of worship and welcome those who use them as an experimental congregation. Having recently purchased Songs of Fellowship 123 they are just as happy singing traditional hymns to the organ or piano as modern hymns led by guitar. There are accredited worship leaders among them who are pleased to be involved and never a shortage of willing volunteers for anything that might be required during the worship.

Faith

In common with many Methodist congregations there are many retired folk, mature in their faith and settled in their journey with God. This can, at times, make them difficult to challenge or to question their long held ideas. However it doesn't seem to deter them from listening. Among their number are also teenagers and young people and others still searching and questioning and hungry to hear about a living God. Knighthorpe is blessed with a healthy Brigade and their parade services are often attended by family members from both other worshipping communities and no church at all. The atmosphere and activity in those services is therefore immensely important given the opportunity to present the gospel to those who have yet to accept it as truth.

2 Choose a Bible passage on the Kingdom of God from this unit to be read in the service and to be used in the sermon.

Exegesis

Romans 14:17-20

¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. ¹⁹Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. ²⁰Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. (NIV)

¹⁷God's kingdom isn't a matter of what you put in your stomach, for goodness' sake. It's what God does with your life as he sets it right, puts it together, and completes it with joy. ¹⁸Your task is to single-mindedly serve Christ. Do that and you'll kill two birds with one stone: pleasing the God above you and proving your worth to the people around you. ¹⁹So let's agree to use all our energy in getting along with each other. Help others with encouraging words; ²⁰don't drag them down by finding fault. You're certainly not going to permit an argument over what is served or not served at supper to wreck God's work among you, are you? I said it before and I'll say it again: All food is good, but it can turn bad if you use it badly, if you use it to trip others up and send them sprawling. (The Message)

a. Outline its context and background

The writer is Paul, a devout Jew and a convert to Christ. The letter was written in about AD56 as an introduction to both Jews and Gentiles of Rome of Paul and his beliefs before his arrival there. At this time the early church was still forming its doctrine, its beliefs and the interrelationships between Jews and Christians and Gentiles.

The letter is an organised and carefully presented statement of faith starting with eleven chapters of intellectual instruction and teaching. These are divided into four main areas; the sinfulness of mankind, forgiveness of sin through Christ, freedom from sin's grasp and Israel's past present and future. Chapters twelve to fourteen cover the practical implications of the teaching and believer's personal responsibilities and the letter concludes with personal notes and many greetings to people he knew in Rome.

The Roman congregation to which Paul wrote was likely to be a synagogue congregation, long established and steeped heavily in the Jewish tradition. They would be keen to keep the Judaism alive by the observance of the law. The influx of gentiles to their number without those observances brought hostility from the Jews. It was important for Paul's mission throughout the known and mostly Roman dominated world that the church in Rome was seen as a universal church. Paul needed to be clear in his message as he was writing to a church he had not attended or visited.

Chapter fourteen deals with the fact that believers are not all in the same faith position and that some are weak and others strong. Here Paul is giving real practical advice and instruction about the implementation of his doctrinal argument while stressing the importance of justification by faith and the universality of the gospel.

b. indicate its original meaning

Entrance to, and membership of, the kingdom of God is not about adherence to the law. But it is about behaviour which demonstrates the love of God as evidenced by our love for each other. Behaviour, diet in this case, that may have been forbidden by an outdated code of practice and therefore legally acceptable should still be avoided if it causes deep offence to others in Christ. Causing offence to others forbids that behaviour rather than it being forbidden by the law.

The kingdom of God is a here and now thing and not something to wait for. The love and respect shown to others demonstrates some understanding of God's love and a willingness to grow in faith as part of the kingdom which is itself growing.

Following Paul's deep intellectual expose of some rather complex theology he demonstrates some very practical implications of being a believer.

c. Consider its message for the congregation you have described

John Wesley and the Apostle Paul are in agreement about of the nature of the kingdom; that it is of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. It is the joy of living under God's kingly rule. For those who have accepted God's rightful rule over everything in Jesus Christ then God's kingdom is here and as that truth spreads so does the kingdom.

The kingdom should not be spoilt by arguing about irrelevances, like the keeping or the breaking of petty man-made rules. If others will be hurt by a course of action or behaviour then it is contrary to love and against God's kingdom living.

For we as believers are the kingdom here and now and our behaviour and attitude can make a difference to what others see as Christian living; the kingdom at work. In the kingdom of God we can grow; in faith, in service, in knowledge and in living the theology of God's kingdom.

Unity of those who live in the kingdom will help it to grow in both depth and in size.

3 State the aim of a sermon for this congregation.

Outline the structure of the sermon – headings and very brief notes only

Aim

To start the year with encouragement even after the Boxing day tsunami devastation.
To help maintain the connection between the relevance of scripture, the wisdom and teaching of John Wesley and contemporary living and events.
To help believers keep focused on God and his kingdom.

Structure

New beginnings
Set the scene in seasonal and contemporary context.

Disaster strikes
Describe the tsunami event and the normal reaction to it.

Not words but the Word
The Christmas message of hope and intro of the kingdom concept.

Neighbours nearby
Put the Romans passage in context using an anecdote

Old habits
Exposition of Romans passage's original meaning in today's context.

Being seen as different
Describe the contemporary practical meaning

Dynamic kingdom
Conclusion and take-away statement – the difference between utopia and God's kingdom.

4 Write the sermon following the structure you have chosen as you would speak it. Make sure you:

- a. communicate the good news
- b. use the Bible appropriately
- c. use appropriate illustrations/stories
- d. take seriously the needs of the congregation
- e. are interesting and creative

New beginnings and old habits

Scripture

Romans 14:17-20

John 1: 1-18

New beginnings

The church calendar is filled with new beginnings.

A new year and a resolution and a new beginning, Easter and the pain of Good Friday turns into the new beginnings of Easter Sunday, Pentecost and we celebrate the birth of the church and another new beginning, harvest and we are thankful for all we have received and we look forward to the new beginnings in the fields and in our lives, and then there's Christmas; the birth of a Saviour 2000 years ago and the start of a new era for mankind everywhere, a new beginning in the relationship between humankind and God. The kingdom of God starts here!

Disaster strikes

This year the Christmas celebrations have been overshadowed by natural disaster, with many thousands of lives being swept away by the giant waves that hit the shores of South Asia. Such a catastrophe numbs the mind. Images of those distant shores are carried into our own homes through television, through the reports of journalists and of tourists now returning home in a state of shock. 'What has Christmas to do with this?' we ask ourselves. Suffering on such a colossal scale challenges us to find any words that are appropriate.

Not words but the Word

At the heart of Christmas there is not a package of words, not a bundle of worn out phrases of comfort, but the divine Word. Rather than preach to us, God has come to share with us. The Word has become flesh to live among us, to show us what it is to be both human and vulnerable and perfect love full of the divine glory; the Word becomes one with us in the midst of family dislocation and chaos, where the only place available is a shelter for animals. And so Christmas does have a message for those caught up in the tsunami tragedy, and particularly for all those bringing help and relief. It is the disclosure of God's presence, God's very self, alongside us: God present in the midst of human pain and despair. Not far away, distant and enthroned on high, but God with us, as we try to

achieve greater human solidarity, and deeper compassion for one another in the face of disaster.

In John 1 we read ⁴*In him was life, and that life was the light of men.*
⁵*The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.*

So true it is that we fail often to understand and resort to thinking in human terms. The kingdom of God is missed because we fail to understand what it is or where it can be found;
 "Holiness and happiness are together called 'the kingdom of God'" according to John Wesley, and he continues "it is called the kingdom of God because it is the immediate result of God reigning in our soul. As soon as we let God rule our hearts they are filled with righteousness, peace and joy of the Holy Spirit."

He goes on to describe Christian righteousness having two branches; the first and greater is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. The second is to love your neighbour as yourself. The desiring of every possible good for others around us. Our neighbour, not only our friend, relative or acquaintance; not only the virtuous person who loves us and repays our kindness, but every human being made by God in his image, even those we've never met, people we don't know, as those in south Asia. Even people who hate us and persecute us. These are the people whom we have to love as we love ourselves, seeking their happiness and their protection.

For those caught in a disaster we can help and love by sending money or clothes and blankets or even taking our skills to help as many have done. We can confidently pray for all those concerned, for the limitless power of our God can be there no matter how many are in need.

Neighbours nearby

In Paul's letter to the Romans we hear about neighbours nearby, and helping or hindering them.

"stop passing judgment on one another" is Paul's first request. In this age of diversity It is difficult not to pass judgement by first impression;
 In our new dining room we can watch people approach the new front door from a slightly elevated position. Just before Christmas a youth tramped up the drive wearing a hoody and jeans, with beanie hat, earring and pierced lip. Everybody thought, wondered and judged, though no one spoke and with great suspicion Liz, who was nearest, answered the door. "Good afternoon Madam, sorry to trouble you but you'd forgotten your Christmas milk order so I've popped round to get it if its not a trouble?"

Oops – *"stop passing judgment on one another"*

Old habits

The reading talks of food being clean or unclean and causing distress. In those days many devout Jews were turning to Christianity but were unable to completely let go of much of the Jewish law. Jesus taught that it

is what comes out of a person that makes them clean or unclean and not what goes in. But some were struggling with the freedom that this new teaching gave them and watching others wallowing in that freedom was offensive to them.

It would be like asking your vegetarian friends round for dinner and only serving the rawest of steaks – not exactly thinking of others first! Although we may not do that, we might inadvertently and unintentionally act or do things, we might consider perfectly acceptable, but for someone new in the faith or from a different culture, they could be outraged or dismayed.

If a non-Christian questions your motives for something what sort of answer do you offer?

“Isn’t drinking and smoking a sin?”

“If the love of money is the route of all evil why do you play the lottery?”

“How can you agree with the Iraqi war when you’re suppose to love your neighbour?”

The Message translation of Romans 14 says:

“God’s kingdom isn’t a matter of what you put in your stomach, for goodness’ sake. It’s what God does with your life as he sets it right, puts it together, and completes it with joy.”

“So let’s agree to use all our energy in getting along with each other. Help others with encouraging words;”

Being seen as different

People outside the church look at us as different, they view Christians sceptically and look for ways in which we fail to live up to their expectations of us. When they find them they can use it as an excuse not to see God or listen to the gospel. In the same way our corporate worship can get in the way of people finding God. In his sermon entitled ‘the way to the kingdom’ John Wesley writes about ceremonies appearing to be excellent functions and being useful for ‘simple folk’, being deeply significant and expressing spiritual things, “yet” he says “they can never be the principal part of true religion. The religion of Jesus is infinitely greater than any formal worship. Ceremonies may be good in their place, as long as they are subordinate to true religion. Do not suppose that they have any intrinsic worth, or that religion cannot manage without them. To think like this would be to make those very ceremonies displeasing to the Lord.”

He goes on to stress that true religion is a matter of the heart and of righteousness, peace and joy in the spirit. Where these lead is obedience to God and the love of all people.

Dynamic kingdom

The kingdom of God is dynamic, in that it grows and spreads from person to person, from pew to pew. As more enter a real relationship with Jesus

and are filled by the Spirit of righteousness and joy so the kingdom here grows.

And it's not about good works, no parent cares for their children to make their children think better of them. They care because they love them. But it doesn't go unnoticed by the children and the love shown is often reflected back. Similarly the wrong word or swift judgement will also be remembered.

The kingdom of God is visible, lives are changed, hearts are mended, sins are forgiven, all this is seen either in small ways by one or two or in big ways that reach the world. Everyone remembers stories that affected them from Lady Dianna's death to the terrorist attack on the twin towers and I'm sure the same will be said of the people in South Asia.

I guess if this world was a total utopia there would be no need of neighbourly love, no one to help, no one to give love to or receive it from; not a utopia I would like to be a part of.

That's the difference between utopia and God's kingdom; the kingdom of God is real and it is here and it is now though not yet complete but still in the making.

Alleluia

Amen

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