

Critique of Kingdom Circles and Recommendations

by Tom Benedict

for personal use by BtD members and Kingdom Circles authors only

Regarding Kingdom Circles, I affirm the at least the following related to their use:

- Focus on the Kingdom can facilitate a Muslim's direct encounter with the teaching of Jesus.
- Jesus ushered in the Kingdom of God, which includes all who will believe in and follow him.
- What we consider to be the Christian World represents a mixture of faith and practice; some consistent with following Jesus, some not.
- Salvation is a matter of faith in Jesus alone; the Bible rejects the imposition of other man-made requirements (e.g., conversion to human culture) as a test of a believer's faith.
- New believers should be encouraged to be faithful followers of Jesus who, as they are able, remain part of existing networks of family, friends and other relationships.
- Kingdom Circles, rightly utilized, may provide a useful pre-evangelistic tool.

Having said that, there are some things about the Kingdom Circles found in the BtD pre-readings which I find confusing or unclear and therefore unhelpful as I presently understand them:

- A major confusion for me is that the Circles have multiple referents. At some points they refer to people, sometimes to socio-religious identity and at others to human culture. Discussion of the Circles can switch between these referents without notice. When speaking of people we easily understand that people of a certain demographic can become believers, locating them in an area of intersection between the Kingdom of God and that demographic. But when speaking of identities and cultures at the points of intersection, what is intended?
- If these points of intersection are truly within the Kingdom of God, isn't it fair to expect identities and culture are under the rule and reign of God with all the newness it brings?
- Even allowing both the, "already" and "not yet" dimensions of Kingdom reality are in play, wouldn't you expect a Kingdom mindset to focus on a grace-filled process of transformation of people and their culture instead of staying the way they are? (I ask this while acknowledging that the Incarnation drives us to meet with people where they're at.)
- Is use of the Circles sufficiently centered on the King and his advancing kingdom—God and his pursuit of his people? Even as a pre-evangelistic tool, can the Circles do better at this? Further, who is the King of the Circles and what is he like? Surely he is a King who brings blessing and loves his people deeply, but he is also a King who requires submission/change. He is a King who both saves and judges. His Circle is in every way superior to the others (is this sufficiently clear?). With this kind of King we understand better that, "primary allegiance" to such a King actually means, "sole allegiance" in the sense that the King always has the right to ask us to drop another allegiance. Is anyone talking about these things when using these Circles?

There's more to say, but constructive critique requires positive suggestion. At present, I am stopping short of writing a new, "preferred" version of the Circles. I submit the thoughts above and suggestions below for further reflection and revision by others.

My principle “technical” recommendation is that Kingdom Circles consistently should have one easily understood referent: people. Similarly, IM/JM strategy and argumentation should focus on biblically understood persons and relationships (the King, his people and their relationships with others) rather than on a concept (retaining socio-religious identity). I further recommend that Jesus’ actual teaching about the Kingdom be kept in the foreground while using the Circles.

It’s my hope that doing these things would help to keep in view:

- a) The King and relationship with him as both Lord and Savior,
- b) Believers being encouraged to grow in Christ while maintaining and developing relationships with those who don’t believe, and
- c) The emergence of diverse yet biblically faithful expressions of ekklesia, the new covenant people of God, in any place where the Kingdom is advancing.

If these are things that we can all affirm as central, then why not put focus on them in our strategies?