

Kingdom Circles, the Kingdom, and the Church

By [Roger Dixon](#) On October 15, 2012 ·

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Introduction

The use of a diagram called Kingdom Circles is a fairly recent phenomenon used by some to explain how people can move into the Kingdom of God without changing their religious affiliation. According to this imaginative proposal, anyone who is a Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist does not have to leave that persuasion to become part of the Kingdom of God. They just accept Jesus as Savior and enter the Kingdom of God while continuing their socio-religious practices. The error in their argument occurs from a very basic misunderstanding of the nature of the Kingdom of God and of the Church.

Kingdom Circles

There are a variety of these diagrams produced by groups such as Jesus in the Quran and Common Ground. Rebecca Lewis describes her version of the Kingdom Circles in the International Journal of Frontier Missiology. This version is depicted in a diagram with 3 figures representing her belief that people are unreasonably being forced to enter the “Christian” community in order to enter the Kingdom of God. “This diagram distinguishes between two kinds of identity: *spiritual* and *socio-religious*. The center circle represents the Kingdom of God. People gain a new *spiritual identity* by entering God’s Kingdom through transforming faith in Jesus Christ. The other circles represent various *socio-religious identities*” (emphasis is hers] (Lewis, 2009:35).

Figure 1

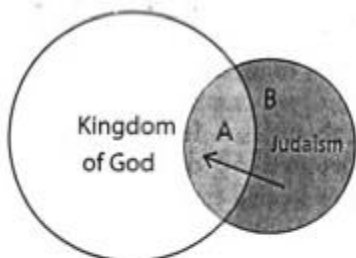


Figure 2

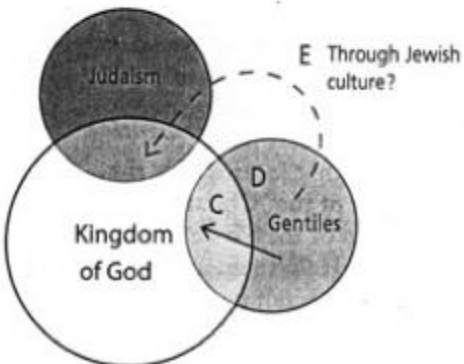
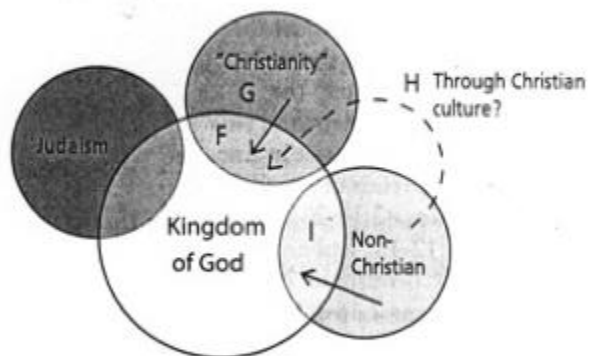


Figure 3



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There are two major errors in this diagram. Figure 1 shows two circles interconnecting to share a common area. One is labeled Kingdom of God and the other Judaism. Firstly, nowhere in scripture is the Kingdom of God described as intersecting to share common ground with any other entity. It is clear from Colossians 1:13-14 that there are only two kingdoms, domains, or authorities. One is the kingdom of the devil and the other is the Kingdom of God. These kingdoms do not interconnect with one another. Scripture clearly teaches that humans reside in one of these kingdoms. No entity such as ethnicity, religion, or creed intersects with the Kingdom of God. In every case, a person is either in the kingdom of darkness or in the Kingdom of God. There is no middle ground or liminal area.

The second error the diagram portrays is the presumption that Jews who believed in Jesus held two socio-religious identities. According to Lewis, a socio-religious identity means cultural and religious practices. The author explains that “many Jews in the book of Acts followed Jesus as Lord and thus entered the Kingdom of God” (Ibid.). She believes that these Jews continued all their cultural and religious practices as Jews despite the fact that Paul testified that he “persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women.” (Acts 22:4) And again, “that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you.” (Acts 22:19). It is obvious to the careful reader of Acts that converted Jews were driven away from the Jewish socio-religious community. Paul testified, “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.” (Philippians 3:7) Jews who followed the Messiah continued to be ethnic Jews but their socio-religious identity as Jews was not recognized by the Jewish community.

In Figure 2, the author draws an additional circle interconnecting with the Kingdom of God circle that represents Gentiles. She explains how some Jewish believers wanted Gentiles “to join the socio-religious system of Judaism” (Ibid) order to follow Jesus. It is clear from Acts 15:1, 5 that the issue was circumcision and the law of Moses rather than accepting Jewish cultural and religious practices. The believing Jews themselves were already marginalized in the community. The Jewish socio-religious community was not sharing common ground with the Kingdom of God and the Gentiles could not enter the Kingdom through Judaism. This is clearly stated by Peter in Acts 15:11.

Figure 3 in Lewis’ diagram shows the author’s concept of the religious situation today where Judaism, Christianity, & the non-Christian world interconnecting with the Kingdom of God. Of course, this cannot be because no entity can intersect with the Kingdom of God. Therefore, these circles do not represent reality but only a figment of imagination. In fact, they are curiously similar to universalism where all religious paths lead to salvation. However, the author does imply that people can “enter the Kingdom of God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ alone and gain a new spiritual identity while retaining their own community and socio-religious identity” (Ibid.) Does this mean that they are born again as Jesus says to Nicodemus? And if they are born again, how can they continue in their former religious practices which are not only not biblical but are also hostile to Jesus as the Son of God?

Lewis does correctly state that “‘Christianity’ has become a socio-religious system encompassing much more than simply faith in Christ. It involves various cultural traditions, religious forms, and ethnic or political associations.” (Ibid.) However, this does not justify setting “Christianity” up as a straw man to knock down. What the author really needs to address is the spiritual Church of Jesus Christ which is the body of our Lord in the world. The Church is in the Kingdom of God and everyone who resides in the Kingdom has been baptized into one body by one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13) that is, the Church.

The Kingdom of God

The subject of the Kingdom of God is large and has a vast amount of research, thought, and publications devoted to it. Scholars argue many points about the way it is depicted in scripture. It is not the purpose of this short article to argue the nature or meaning of the Kingdom of God. In this discussion about kingdom circles and the Kingdom of God it is only expedient to mention a few points; i.e., the Kingdom of God is at hand, we must seek it, it must be entered, one must be born again to enter, and the unrighteous do not enter it.

When Paul makes his declaration in Colossians 1:13-14 that a person can be moved from the kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of God, he bases it on the teachings of Jesus. In Matthew 10:7, Jesus tells us that the Kingdom is at hand. But we are not actually in it. It does not interconnect with our religious orientation. Jesus says that we must seek the Kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). This means that we are not in it. There is a need to move from where we are into that Kingdom. However, there are those who are not able to enter (Matthew 18:3). Although the Kingdom may be near (Luke 21:31), one must be born again to enter (John 3:3). Paul understands that the unrighteous will not inherit it (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

These sayings of Jesus, and many like them in the gospels show us clearly that the Kingdom of God has its own entity. It does not overlap or flow into any other entity such as a religious construct or practices. No religion, philosophy, or socio-religious identity (as Rebecca Lewis describes it) interconnects with the Kingdom of God. Therefore, it seems logical to assume that it is not possible to stay in a false religious construct while living in the Kingdom of God. One would have to resort to pretense to do so. Since pretense is not a biblical trait and surely is not God’s will for a believer, it is not possible to justify trying it no matter what the intent of the pretender would be (2 Corinthians 4:2).

There may be justification for not calling oneself a “Christian.” But if one is not called a Christian, then what term would be descriptive? The follower of the prophet Jesus is, in fact, a follower of Christ for Jesus is the Christ. In scripture, Jesus is referred to as a prophet several times whereas he is referred to as the Christ over 300 times. The use of the definite article with the word Christ clearly shows that it means more than simply “anointed.” When Paul writes about “the Christ,” there is no confusion as to his meaning. Clearly, the writers of the New Testament considered themselves followers of Jesus the Christ. Thus, it does not surprise us to read in 1 Peter 4:14-16 that Peter uses the name “Christian” in reference to the believers. [The Greek word for “Christian” is debated by scholars but Arndt & Gingrich follow W. Bauer in their translation of his lexicon]

It is understandable that believers in some countries would be reluctant to call themselves Christians for a number of reasons. The main reason is spiritual because belief in Jesus as the Son of God is anathema to most religions. Secondly, the so-called “Christian” culture of the west which is not really Christian is held in disrepute by many people in the world. However, despite the degenerate condition of many so-called Christian cultures, they are no worse than the cultures in which other religions thrive, and in most cases they are better. Thirdly, it seems obvious that most, if not all, religious followers adjust to the cultures in which they live. My personal observation of religious people in three south Asian countries indicates that all of them adjust to basically the same social rules and customs. The exceptions seem to be the central religious celebrations or customs of their faiths. The fact that some or all new believers are forced out of their families and communities does not seem to be sufficient reason to require them to continue the false religious practices from which Jesus freed them.

Around three thousand years ago the psalmist recognized the power of non-biblical cultures to mold their followers. In Psalm 115:8 we read about idol worship and how the customs and ceremonies of false religious beliefs pollute the minds of those who participate in them: “Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them” (ESV). The wisdom that God gave the psalmist so many years ago is something that should be considered today if any are encouraging new believers to stay in their previous religious disciplines. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 3:16 that “when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.” But if new believers are encouraged or required to maintain the very structures and spirit powers that keep them veiled from the truth, how can they grow spiritually? Therefore, there is no justification for teaching converts that they are not “Christian” and keeping them in spiritual bondage to false gods.

The Church

Perhaps the basic problem with those who follow the kingdom circles' philosophy is that they lack mature understanding of either the Kingdom of God or the nature and purpose of the Church. In the New Testament, the church of God is spoken of in both the visible and invisible sense- both the spiritual and the material. There are many references of both kinds and it is important to note those references that show how the invisible Church (which we write with a capital C) is manifested as the body of Christ to accomplish God's purposes in the world.

When Jesus spoke to Peter & the disciples about the Church, his words were: "the gates of hell will not prevail against it." This indicated that the Church had a spiritual dimension as well as a physical one. Most of the references to the church in the New Testament concern the local congregations, that is, the church that can be seen. In the King James Version, it is usually called the "church of God." But there are also key passages that explain the dynamic spiritual role of the unseen Church in the world. It is critical that we understand the meaning of these verses.

There are two key issues that stand out. One is that there is a mystery involved in the Church and it is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs (Ephesians 3:4). The second issue is that God is fulfilling an eternal purpose in the Church. This is that "the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (3:10). As we share the gospel to people of other faith systems, we have to keep these truths in mind. Those who believe are fellow heirs with us in the worldwide fellowship of believers. If we separate them from that universal fellowship, we not only harm their spiritual growth but we frustrate God's purpose. In the same way, we must proclaim the role God's Church plays in making known God's wisdom to unrighteous spiritual forces. If we allow these spiritual powers to hold sway over new believers, we not only cripple the spiritual growth of the believers but we allow evil spiritual forces access to them through their unbiblical ceremonies.

In Colossians 1:15-20 Paul explains that the pre-existing Son of God, who holds together all things in the world, is "the head of the body, the church." This mystery is paramount in understanding the separation that must take place between believers and other faith systems. In Col. 1:24, Paul repeats the truth that the church is the body of Christ. It is not possible for a person to dwell in two

opposing camps. If a person is in the body of Christ, the Church, he cannot be in another religious body. Paul tells us that this is a mystery hidden for ages but has now been revealed (Col.1:26). God has made known to us “how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). Since we have such an amazing and wonderful message, why would we want to leave people in the bondage of their former religious practices?

If the Kingdom of God is the sphere in which we live, the Church is the instrument of God for his purposes in this world. In Ephesians 3:9-11 Paul explains the particular purpose God has for the Church. “To bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.” If we hide the revelation of the Church from those who think they are coming to Christ for salvation, we are, in fact, misleading them with a false gospel and denying them the glory of standing with Christ against supernatural spiritual powers. Christ is calling them out of their ignorance into the mystery of living in his divine will. Paul explains this in Eph. 1:9: “making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and on earth.”

Closing

In closing, it is true to state that it is not possible to separate the Kingdom of God and His Church because the two are intertwined in God’s purposes. Because of this, those who come into his Church, the body of Christ, through faith cannot also be subject to another kingdom, socio-religious authority, or spiritual domain. It is not biblical to teach that such a condition is possible or to remain silent if people do not understand this truth. There is a real Kingdom of Light and there is a real kingdom of darkness. They do not overlap. Even Lewis’ diagrams show how one gets gray where light and dark mix.

Lewis, Rebecca (2009). “Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community”
International Journal of Frontier Missiology 26:1 January-March) 2009:35