“IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD ABOUT EATING AND DRINKING OR ISN’T IT?” (ROMANS 14:17)

by

GARY STEVEN SHOGRÉN

Seminario ESEPA, San José, Costa Rica

1. Form and Origin

In the whole of the canonical Pauline corpus, there are perhaps fourteen references to God’s kingdom, the bulk of which (1 Thes. 2:12; 2 Thes. 1:5; Gal. 5:21; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 15:50; Eph. 5:5) derive from the tradition of “inheriting the kingdom.” But in 1 Cor. 4:20 and in Rom. 14:17, Paul appeals to the kingdom using a couplet formula. That “the kingdom of God is not x but y” appears first in Paul, and is commonly regarded as his own invention.\(^1\) ὀὐ γὰρ introduces what the kingdom is not, ἄλλα ἃ what it is. Rather than a predicate adjective, we have the more striking predicate nominatives in Romans, and prepositional phrases in Corinthians. Dunn\(^2\) says that the kingdom “does not consist in,” “does not depend on,” or “is not a matter of” the predicate, the sense that one also finds in the “dynamic” renderings

---

\(^1\) E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (trans. and ed. by G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 377; J. Baumgarten, *Paulus und die Apokalyptik: Die Auslegung apokalyptischer Überlieferungen in den echten Paulusbriefen* (WMANT 44; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1975) 89-91; G. Haufe, “Reich Gottes bei Paulus und in der Jesutradition,” *NTS* 31 (1985) 467-72. The longer recension of Ignatius, *Eph.* 15 contains an early application of 1 Cor. 4:20. It raises a whole cluster of issues to note this, but Rom. 14:17 bears some resemblance to the Matthean Sermon on the Mount (as note W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans* [ICC; 5th ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902] 381). Jesus there blesses the “peacemakers” (εἰρηνηστοι, 5:9), those who hunger and thirst for δικαιοσύνη (5:6, 10), and those who rejoice (χαίρω) in suffering (5:12). In Rom. 14:17, Paul characterizes the βασιλεία with δικαιοσύνη καὶ εἰρήνη καὶ χαρά ἐν πνευματί ἀγίῳ. The verbal similarities with Matt. 5:1-12 could possibly indicate that Paul was familiar with that tradition and that he modified it for the benefit of the Romans. The use of διώκω as persecution in Matt. 5:11-12 becomes Paul’s admonition to “seek” peace in Rom. 14:19. It has even been suggested that the reason Paul uses βασιλεία in such a way is that he is adapting the term from dominical tradition, although this theory does not explain the parallel in 1 Cor. 4:20. It is more likely that Paul is adapting general traditional language rather than a specific dominical saying.

of Phillips, TEV, NIV, and NLT. These are not dictionary definitions of the kingdom of God, but what Haufe calls an antithetical style of definition (antithetische Definitionstil), intended to bring out some corollary of the kingdom within a particular situation. Haufe locates the form’s origin in Hellenistic philosophical speech conventions. Actually, broad parallels lay even closer at hand, in Hellenistic Jewish literature, for example, 1 Macc. 3:19—"It is not on the size of the army that victory in battle depends (οὐκ ἐν . . . ἐστίν), but strength comes from Heaven" (see also 1 Kgdms. 2:9-10, Zech. 4:6; we will cite the NRSV). What is more, the formula resembles other apostolic declarations of what it is that truly matters in the eyes of God: “For neither circumcision counts for anything (οὐδὲν ἐστὶν) nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God (1 Cor. 7:19),” and “For neither circumcision counts for anything (τί ἐστίν), nor uncircumcision, but a new creation (Gal. 6:15).”

In Romans 14, Paul points to the kingdom of God to measure the values and behavior of two sorts of Christian, known as the Strong and the Weak. As a standard, “no consideration could have greater relevance or force than to be reminded negatively and positively of that in which the kingdom of God consists.” The kingdom does not concern itself with food issues, according to the apostle, so long as they do not transgress the law of love. Schreiner mentions a similar teaching in Matt. 23:23—“For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.” Nevertheless, in Matthew the duties are ranked: justice is more important than tithing, but neither is there release from the latter, which “you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.” According to Romans, eating and drinking have become matters of indifference in God’s realm.

2. The Socio-religious Setting of Romans 14

a. The broader issues of Romans

There is no avoiding the contextual issues surrounding the chapter. For example, was Paul dealing with a hypothetical situation, a real

---

3 Haufe, “Reich Gottes,” 469.