

THE KINGDOM OF THE SWORD

Quotes to think about

- The kingdom of the world is in essence a “power over” kingdom. There have been democratic, socialist, communist, fascist, and totalitarian versions of the kingdom of the world, but they all share this distinctive characteristic: they exercise “power over” people. (18)
- Followers of Jesus must realize...that the hope of the world lies not in any particular version of the kingdom of the world...The hope of the world lies in a kingdom that is not of this world...a kingdom that operates with a completely different understanding of power. It is the kingdom of God. (27)
- We fallen humans have passionate convictions that control us and lead us into conflict with others who have equally passionate convictions. We believe in *our* nation over and against *their* nation, *our* religion over and against *their* religion, *our* culture over and against *their* culture, *our* political ideology over and against *their* political ideology, and so on. (24)

Questions for Reflection

- Can you give examples of “power over” kingdoms you have experienced or know about? Consider the full spectrum, from a small or local level (or a house church) to international examples. Are there any exceptions to this “rule” that Body has voiced?
- Discuss how Luke 22:25-27 relates to the type of “kingdoms” we find ourselves living in and for. Where do you find clarity in this passage? What are the gray areas or lingering unanswered questions you have?
- Identify and share where you have (to whatever degree) believed that *our* nation, culture, religion, political ideology, etc. is superior to *theirs*.

Practices:

- Spend some time in confession for the real and/or potential way our beliefs have caused us to view and/or treat others as an enemy.
- “But not so with you.” Lk 22:26 / reflect / meditate / memorize ???

THE KINGDOM OF THE CROSS

Quotes to think about

- The kingdom of the world is centrally concerned with what people *do*; the kingdom of God is centrally concerned with how people *are* and what they can *become*...The crucial distinction between the two kingdoms is how they provide antithetical answers to the questions of what power one should trust to change ourselves and others: Do you trust “power over” or “power under”? (32-33)
- For their (Jesus, Peter, and Paul) teaching is not merely that we are to *act lovingly* toward our enemy while we clench our teeth. No, we are to *genuinely* love them, and one’s ability and willingness to do this is the most distinctive manifestation of the reign of God in one’s life. (41)
- If this teaching sounds impractical and irrational...this is simply evidence of how much we have bought into the thinking of the kingdom of the world. By kingdom of the world standards, this *is* impractical and irrational...but this radical, non-common-sensical, “power under” love *is* the kingdom of God, for this loving way of living reflects the nature of God and looks like Jesus. (42)
- Our battle is “not against flesh and blood,” whether they are right wing or left wing, gay or straight, pro-choice or pro-life, liberal or conservative, democratic or communist, American or Iraqi. Our battle is against the “cosmic powers” that hold these people, and all people, in bondage...So too, we contribute to the demise of the “power over” principalities that hold people in bondage when we refrain from judgment of others and rather extend grace to them, when we let go of anger toward others and instead “come under” them in loving service. (48-49)

Questions for Reflection

- Early in this chapter (29-35), Boyd tries to establish that we are to follow in the steps of Jesus as the embodiment of his way of life (ie, kingdom of God). What aspects of his treatment of this do you find convincing, lacking, clarifying, frustrating, etc.?
- In the middle of this chapter (35-42), Boyd attempts to demonstrate the “power under” way of life as demonstrated by Jesus. What aspects of his description do you find compelling? Which stories, metaphors, etc. cause you to want to live differently?

- Share stories and examples of when you have witnessed this irrational “power under” kind of love described as part of the Kingdom of the Cross. Do you agree with Boyd that this is (one of) the most distinctive manifestations of the reign of God in one’s life?
- Compare and Contrast these two kingdoms (46-49). Make an ongoing (for future reference) list of “characteristics” of each kingdom. Consider having a list of “ongoing / unanswered questions”.

Practices:

- Lectio divina / contemplative prayer RE: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

KEEPING THE KINGDOM HOLY

Quotes to think about

- By God’s design, people are not to be won over to his kingdom primarily by our clever arguments, scary religious tracts, impressive programs, or our sheer insistence that they are going to hell unless they share our theological opinions. No, they are to be won over by the way in which we replicate Calvary to them. They are to *see* and *experience* the reality of the coming kingdom in us. (53)
- In summation of pps. 54-55: The kingdom of God is not an ideal version of the kingdom of the world; it’s not something that any version of the kingdom of the world can aspire toward or be measured against. The kingdom of God is a completely distinct, alternative way of doing life. (55)
- Jesus didn’t come to give us the Christian answer to the world’s many sociopolitical quandries, and he didn’t come to usher in a new and improved version of the kingdom of the world...Jesus’ mission wasn’t to improve the old; his mission, and the mission he gave his disciples, was to embody the new—an entirely new way of doing life. (59)
- The thing people should rather be concerned with, Jesus is saying, is whether or not they are giving to God what bears *his* image and what therefore belongs wholly to him—namely, their very lives.” (61)
- While Jesus never sided with any of the limited and divisive kingdom of the world options routinely set before him, the church today, by and large, swallows them hook, line, and sinker. Indeed, in some circles, whether conservative or liberal, taking particular public stands on social, ethical, and political issues, and siding with particular political or social ideologies, is the litmus test of one’s orthodoxy. What this suggests is that the church has been co-opted by the world...we’ve made these conflicts our own as we fight with each other over “the Christian” option. (63-64)

Questions for Reflection

- As you re-read pps. 52-53, where do you agree/disagree with Boyd’s description of what the church should/should not look like? In what ways does this expose (affirming and critiquing) your personal life, your house church, Mars Hill as a whole?
- Describe if (and to what degree) you have assumed that the USA has achieved a nation/government/society that is closer to the kingdom of God than most others?
- What does this reveal about our tendency to unwittingly live according to the heartbeat of a myth we do not even see, hear or understand? What might some other myths be?
- Boyd uses Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector to demonstrate that liberals and conservatives could co-exist in an intimate, close group of Jesus followers. Why is this so unlikely in the American Church right now? Does the culture of your house church/small group allow for vast differences between kingdom of God people?
- Has the church been co-opted by the world? Must we play by their “either / or” rules? If there is a third way, how do we go about pursuing it?

Practices:

- A time of praying for the spirit to...
 - Reveal the myths that we have lived by
 - Lead us to repentance and renewal
 - Give us hope for a third way that will demonstrate the kingdom of God is alive across the whole world.

FROM RESIDENT ALIENS TO CONQUERING WARLORDS

Quotes to think about

- The reason God now calls kingdom people to remain separate from the ways of the kingdom of the world is not to isolate them from their culture but to empower them to authentically serve their culture and ultimately win it over to allegiance to Jesus Christ. The reason we are not to be *of* the world is so we may be *for* the world. (72)
- Jesus knew what we must know: Everything rests on our resisting the Devil's temptation to do what seems to be immediate good things without suffering, instead of kingdom of God things that are slow, discrete, and always involve an element of sacrifice. (75)
- Tragically, the history of the church has been largely a history of believers refusing to trust the way of the crucified Nazarene and instead giving in to the very temptation he resisted...it is a history of people who too often identified the kingdom of God with a "Christian" version of the kingdom of the world. (75)
- Hence, in the name of winning the world for Jesus Christ, the church often became the main obstacle to believing in Jesus Christ. (81)
- While God uses the sword of governments to preserve law, order, and justice, as we have seen, there is a corrupting principality and power always at work. Much like the magical ring in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the sword has a demonic power to deceive us. When we pick it up, we come under its power. It convinces us that our use of violence is a justified means to a noble end. It intoxicates us with the unquenchable dream of redemptive violence and blinds us to our own iniquities, thereby making us feel righteous in overpowering the unrighteousness of others. (83-84)

Questions for Reflection

- Describe how each of you has individually interpreted the often stated dictum, "we are called to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world." How have you lived out your own interpretation as it applies to family, vocation, school, leisure, where you live, possessions, etc.?
- What are the points of similarity and contrast between your views and those expressed by Boyd in his discussion of the "rapture" on pps. 72-73?
- As a group, chronicle the history of the church after Constantine made Christianity the official religion, thus making it a crime *not* to be a Christian (75-81). How does having Christianity associated with the use of the sword in the events mentioned make you *feel* (vs. what do you think about it)? Ask one another to share feelings (and redirect when others switch to sharing opinions, beliefs, facts, etc.)
- Where is the church tempted, even now, by the mysterious power associated with the sword? Consider topics such as abortion, drugs/alcohol, taxes, pledge of allegiance. Are there topics/issues that you can begin to see that the church should have more/less influence over? Which issues do you find yourself reluctant to "let go" of...or switch your view on?

Practices:

- As a group, write a prayer together that can be said individually and as a group that will...
 - Acknowledge the horrific and beautiful things the church has done
 - Reminds us of our status as "resident aliens" *for* the world
 - Calls us beyond/above the fray and labels (conservative vs. liberal, democrat vs. republican, traditional vs. progressive) in pursuit of a 3rd Way as one who demonstrates the kingdom of God.
- Use this prayer at the beginning and end of your times together (perhaps for the whole electoral process).
- Consider to committing to saying this prayer daily at agreed upon times, number of times per day, etc.

TAKING AMERICA BACK FOR GOD

Quotes to think about

- The evidence of this [the American evangelical church being co-opted by the power of the sword] is all around but nowhere clearer than the simple, oft-repeated slogan that we Christians are going to "take America back for God." (90-91)
- Whenever Christians have gotten what so many American evangelicals today are trying to get—namely, the power to enforce their righteous will on others—it eventually harms the church as well as the culture...the best way to get people to lay down the cross is to hand them the sword! (94-95)
- If we are to take America *back* for God, it must have once belonged to God, but it's not at all clear when this golden Christian age was. (98)
- But the bloody injustices don't negate the fact that America has arguably now become, by historic and global standards, a relatively good version of the kingdom of the world. Still, we must never confuse the positive things that America does with the kingdom of God, for the kingdom of God is not centered on being morally, politically, or socially

positive *relative* to other versions of the kingdom of the world. Rather, the kingdom of God is centered on being beautiful, as defined by Jesus Christ dying on a cross for those who crucified him. (103)

- The question that wins the world is not, how can we get our “morally superior” way enforced in the world? The question that wins the world, and the question that must define the individual and collective life of kingdom of God citizens is, how do we take up the cross for the world? How do we best communicate to others their unsurpassable worth before God? How do we serve and wash the feet of the oppressed and despised? (104)

Questions for Reflection

- Have you ever been in a service like the one Boyd describes in the opening pages of this chapter, where the sword and the cross are blended together? What were your feelings (positive, negative, indifferent)? After reading this book so far, how would you anticipate your response to this kind of service now?
- On pg 91, Boyd summarizes the thinking of some who wish we could “take America back for God.” Have you heard people you know use this rationale? Is there part of it that resonates with you? Do you find yourself thinking, “yes, if we could do those things...the country and society would be better off”? Is Boyd suggesting that we shouldn’t care about these issues anymore? And if not, what is he trying to express?
- From 93-98, Boyd describes a temptation that faces the church? What is this temptation? To what degree has the American evangelical church “given in” to this temptation? To what degree have you, under the influence of this myth, also fallen in line with this thinking?
- Pages 98-102 offer a lot of good fodder for conversation. How did you react to Boyd’s questioning of the so-called golden age of America? Were there any particular time periods that grieved your soul?
- When Jesus was crucified, it appeared that he (and the kingdom of God) was losing. What encouragement does this give you to trust the “power under” of God’s kingdom?

Practices:

- Spend some time together affirming the good things for which we can be thankful for because of our country, nation, and society.
- Now, read the Lord’s prayer together (Matt 6:9-13). Have each person in your group *slowly* read it out loud. Let it wash over you. Soak in its depth and simplicity. Let this prayer overshadow (but not erase) the good things you have said about your country and society.

THE MYTH OF A CHRISTIAN NATION

Quotes to think about

- In my opinion, nothing has been more damaging to the advancement of the beautiful kingdom in America, and to a significant degree around the globe, than this myth that America is a Christian nation. (107)
- The result is that it has become humanly impossible for many around the globe to hear the good news as *good*. Instead, because of it’s kingdom of the world associations, they hear the gospel as *bad* news, as *American* news, *exploitive capitalistic* news, *greedy* news, *violent* news, and *morally decadent* news. (110)
- This is what we are called to be: a community characterized by radical, revolutionary, Calvary-quality love; a community that manifests the love of the triune God (Jn 17:21-26); a community that strives for justice not by conquering but by being willing to suffer; a community that God uses to transform the world by providing it with an alternative to its own self-centered, violent way of existing. (122)

Questions for Reflection

- In this chapter, Boyd discusses 3 of the 5 negative consequences he names as a result of the myth of a Christian nation. What are the three consequences? Which one strikes you as the most significant, meaningful, sad, etc.?
- Read John 1:1-5 and further discuss what Boyd introduces on p. 109. Have you (or have you heard others) who interpret and use this passage President Bush appeared to? What is a better interpretation and application of this passage? How should it cause us to view people of other cultures, nations, and/or faiths?
- How does the view and perception of the rest of the world effect our mission/engagement around the world for the sake of the Kingdom of God? Do you have personal experience with this? Share your own stories where the stamping the “Christian” label on America is problematic.
- What is the interplay between civil religion and Christian spirituality? Do you agree or disagree with the idea that we should be tweaking the civil religion as discussed on p. 115?

- Boyd spends the last 1/3 of the chapter discussing the importance and role of prayer. How was prayer used in the New Testament as a “power under” influence? How can we engage more frequently and fruitfully in this “power under” way of living for the Kingdom of God?

Practices:

- Spend some time praying for...
 - The election process
 - Your local leaders and your national leaders
 - Other nations and their governments
 - Your enemies, personally and politically
- Make note of the people that you feel compelled to continue praying for in this way.

WHEN CHIEF SINNERS BECOME MORAL GUARDIANS

Quotes to think about

- When people who are serious about their Christian faith buy into the myth that America is a Christian nation, they can easily conclude that it is their job to keep America as Christian as possible, if not restore America back to its supposed Christian heritage. As a result, they may intentionally or unintentionally position themselves as moral guardians of society, coming to believe it is their job to preserve and promote moral issues—and fix moral problems. (127)
- Ask any random sampling of pagans in America what first comes to their mind when you say the words *evangelical* or *born again* Christian, and chances are close to zero that anything like “outrageous, sacrificial love” will be the first thing out of their mouths. (134)
- The group most vocal about “the sanctity of marriage,” namely evangelical Christians, happens to be the group with the highest number of divorces in the United States, which itself has the highest divorce rate in the world!... Whatever our excuses, outsiders legitimately wonder, “If evangelicals want to enforce by law the ‘sanctity of marriage,’ why don’t they try to outlaw divorce and remarriage? Better yet, why don’t they stop worrying about laws to regulate *others’* behavior and spend their time and energy sanctifying their *own* marriages?” (136-137)
- When evangelicals assume the posture of knowing what is best for society, it only serves to further undermine the credibility of the good news we are commissioned to proclaim, and it hinders the advancement of the kingdom of God. (141)
- The distinctly kingdom question is not, How should we vote? The distinctly kingdom question is, How should we live? ...Voting and picketing costs us little. The kingdom approach costs us much

Questions for Reflection

- The first quote above names the 4th out of 5 damaging consequences of this myth of a Christian nation. Restate and refresh what the first three are. Where do you feel this 4th consequence ranks? Is Boyd more or less convincing on this point, in your estimation?
- Do you agree with Boyd (128-132) that Jesus did not come to judge...nor did he judge those he encountered? What are the Scripture texts that convince you one way or the other? Discuss the two *possible* exceptions found in John 8:11 and John 4:16-18.
- Hypocrisy is the topic of pps. 136-139. Is this a fair and accurate assessment of the evangelical church? Share your own experiences and examples of hypocrisy and how it detracts from the work of building the kingdom of God. In your opinion, will laws or love do more to compel people to live for the kingdom of God?
- On pg. 141, just after the 4th quote above, Boyd asks, “Does this mean that evangelical Christians shouldn’t speak out publicly on moral issues? What do you think? Should we...and if so...how? Consider the paragraphs that follow this quote.
- Reread from p. 143 to the top of p. 144. Boyd states that “voting and picketing costs us little, while the kingdom approach costs us much.” Consider the issue of abortion. Many people will choose their candidate for president/governor/etc. based almost solely on how the candidate votes on abortion. Then, these people will do nothing between this vote and four years later to help overcome the many issues that effect the abortion rate and someone’s choice to have an abortion. What could they do that would be more in line with a “power under” approach that might cost them much? Apply this same question to other important issues...environment, immigration, marriage, welfare, etc.

Practices:

- If LOVE WINS, then we should be cultivating love in our lives as our key asset, strategy, gift, etc. for displaying and announcing Jesus and his kingdom. The famous “love chapter” from 1 Corinthians 13 is NOT principally a chapter for marriages and relationships. Rather, it is about the upside-down “power under” way of life that compels people towards this Kingdom of Jesus. Spend some time as a group reading through this chapter (v. 4-7). Pause after each statement to allow for short responses in prayer (confession, praise, commitment, help). If people, issues, etc. come to mind—name them as you pray for them. Close by reading out loud together, v. 1-3.

ONE NATION UNDER GOD?

Quotes to think about

- When the theocratic-sounding slogan “one nation under God” is taken too seriously, it makes people think of America along the lines of Israel and the Old Testament rather than Jesus and the New Testament. Just as God gave the Promised Land to Israel while vanquishing and enslaving opponents, so too, many believe, God gave America to white Europeans—while vanquishing all who resisted this takeover and enslaving others to build the nation. (148)
- This nationalistic religion [of American democracy] co-opts Christian rhetoric, but it in fact has nothing to do with real Christianity, for it has nothing to do with the kingdom of God. (150)
- While one may or may not contend that America wields the sword more justly than most other versions of the kingdom of the world, under no circumstances is a kingdom of God participant justified in claiming that it is a nation that is more “under God” than any other nation in the world.” (152-153)
- As with most other Americans, many Christians assume it’s the church’s job to take care of people’s *spiritual* needs and the government’s job to take care of people’s *physical* needs. We preach the gospel while government is supposed to care for the poor, the homeless, the oppressed, the disabled, or the sick. (153)
- Instead of living to sacrifice for others, we become the official “sin-pointer-outers.” Instead of gaining a reputation of being humble servants who manifest Calvary-quality love, we gain a reputation for being moralistic and self-righteous. And predictably, we drive away the tax collectors and prostitutes of our day, just as the Pharisees did, rather than attracting them, as Jesus did. (155)

Questions for Reflection

- This chapter highlights the 5th of 5 negative consequences of this myth. Review and name all five. What are the two conceptual problems and the two further negative consequences he discusses in this chapter?
- Do you agree that the “religion of American democracy” and political freedom have been intertwined with Christianity? Have we placed “political freedom” too high on our list of values? Do you believe, contra Boyd, that it should be considered a kingdom value? Why/Why not?
- Consider the quote above from pps. 152-153. Have you lived your life assuming that our nation is more “under God” than other nations? How has your perspective changed/remained the same? Think back to some of the times you’ve sung or listened to the refrain, “God bless America.” Will you hear it differently now? How do you propose we properly celebrate our nation, while at the same time keeping that passion and enthusiasm properly ordered under our living for the Kingdom of God?
- What do you believe is a wise balance between what the government is responsible for and what church is responsible for in caring for people and meeting their needs? How would you rate your church community in this area? What are the things they are doing well? What else could they be doing? What is your house church / small group / family doing to relieve the government of doing the work of the church?
- The top of p. 156 describes the role of prophets and watchman. How does this description shape your understanding of our role as citizens of the kingdom of God who also happen to live in America? What encouragement do you gain from the explanation of Paul’s model of evangelism? What is frustrating about this?

Practices:

- Discuss, pray, and identify a couple of things your house church can commit to doing to relieve the government of the work the church should be doing. Write these down. Make them part of your ongoing discussion as you search for meaningful ways to implement them.

CHRISTIANS AND VIOLENCE: CONFRONTING THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

Read the last chapter and discuss.

