

“Thy Kingdom Come”

In the modern Church, even in the most staunchly conservative of evangelical churches, there's a huge misconception that I'm going to attempt to clear up. It's a matter I've mentioned over and over in previous Sunday School lessons, but that needs to be addressed directly. It's the Kingdom of God.

The Church unfortunately has been, since its earliest days, Gentilized; and it's therefore been pre-occupied (almost to the point of obsession) with . . . church! And false notions (amillennialism), also since its earliest days, have assumed preeminence in the church's eschatology. So the whole Kingdom project of God that began at Creation has been (almost, not entirely, but almost) lost. Lost! It needs to be recovered and restored to its rightful place. This isn't just abstract theology, nor is it something so controversial that it can be safely ignored. We need to discuss this.

In the broad sweep of biblical history, Church is just a temporary, interim work of the Spirit. The Bible's grand scope has to do with the Kingdom. Because we live in this interim era, and because Paul so often referred to the Church in his writings (because that was his burden), perhaps we can be excused for misunderstanding the grand work of God. But we need to have a biblical worldview, and that should be focused on the Kingdom. The kingdom of God is, to quote Wm. Mounce, “the purple thread that weaves its way throughout Scripture as a unifying theme.”

Let's first be clear, Church is not the Kingdom. Kingdom means rule, and Christ is not now ruling. Rule means coercive authority. Jesus is King, but He is not exercising His biblical, kingly prerogatives, yet. He will when He returns, but not now. (I don't deny that the Son is authoritatively ruling the entire cosmos. He is at the Father's right hand on God's heavenly throne. But that's an invisible rule we cannot know anything about. It's His sovereign work as God.) Jesus is revealed to be right now serving as Priest, High priest, and we who are in Christ and identify with Him are priests under Him. But Jesus is not the theocratic, promised King and neither are we kings. Church is God's interim program of continuing the seeking out and preparing of people for the coming Kingdom, during this Times of the Gentiles while Israel is still in exile. Church is God's unique work for this interval between the First and Second Advents of Israel's Messiah, while Israel continues to reject their Messiah and King.

Creation was intended to be a theocratic rule. Man was made to be God's vice-regent on earth, to rule as God's lieutenant. Because of disobedience, God deliberately changed His physical creation to frustrate man's attempt to rule. And another One would have to come to rule, Someone else with Whom humanity would identify. A king was included in the promises to Abraham. After the Exodus, at Sinai, the new nation of Israel was intended to be “a kingdom of priests” with God right there in their midst. It was to be a theocratic rule, reprising what was intended in the Garden. That didn't work out either. The period of the Judges revealed that in the absence of a king, because of sin, only chaos exists. When the monarchy at last was established, God had to show that the character of the person who rules is of primary importance. Thus Saul was excluded. David was the right kind of person, fit to be king, serving as God's theocratic ruler. Yet even David wasn't that Person who was promised. And the long sad saga of the monarchy revealed that none of those kings were the promised Ruler.

The writing prophets anticipated a righteous king who would come, establishing a kingdom of peace and prosperity. It would be a wonderful era, when even the physical creation would be delivered from laboring under a curse. So, as the monarchy came to an end and Israel went into exile, the prophets extended a hope for a glorious future. Daniel revealed that, despite the dreadful Times of the Gentiles, “a rock” eventually would come from heaven, bring the Times of the Gentiles to a sudden end, bring the Exile to an end, and establish the promised Kingdom of God that would never end. It's beginning would be like a new and better Exodus. For this future era, there would even be a new covenant with Israel, better than the Sinai covenant, one that promised the forgiveness of sins and the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit. It would be a Kingdom with Israel's ideal, righteous king physically there, ruling over the entire earth. Even Gentiles would not only submit to His rule but worship Israel's exalted king. The prophetic vision is for a 2nd Adam, the ideal human, the ideal Israel, the ultimate and perfect offspring of David, to fulfill God's creation intent of a world of peace, prosperity and righteousness under His theocratic rule, with all his subjects united to Him as a corporate unity.

In time, God sent John the Baptist to announce that that promised kingdom was imminent. Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom was “at hand.” Jesus came to prepare His people Israel for that kingdom. It was the promised time! He was the King and He was there. And because the ethics of that Kingdom are radically different from what we know as normal (thus the Sermon on the Mount, for example, or the instructional corpus of Paul), much preparation is necessary.

Satan had been given all the Gentile nations to rule over them. If Jesus was the promised Messianic King, Satan's dominion was over; he was finished. Satan wasn't so sure that the humble Jesus was that promised One. So he tested Jesus. The temptations in the wilderness weren't to try to get Jesus to bypass the cross. No, they were to determine who Jesus is! If Jesus were the promised King, Satan wanted Him dead. The offer of the kingdoms was a bona fide offer. Satan had dominion over all the Gentile kingdoms of earth and could grant rule to Jesus, if Jesus would submit to him. In other words, Satan was offering a Satan-centric rule, rather than a theocratic or God-centered rule. But Jesus knew He was there to rule as the promised theocratic Ruler. To his great chagrin, Satan discovered who Jesus is. The cross was to get the King dead so that He couldn't rule. (Satan never expected a resurrection.)

In the Gospels, we read what kind of Person Jesus is and how Jesus taught people to prepare them for the Kingdom. The cross (and the resurrection) was necessary to prepare people for the Kingdom, to make them fit to be in the presence of Israel's Holy One. The cross also revealed that Satan is not fit to rule, only Jesus is. Satan doesn't love God and doesn't love his subjects. Jesus does.

After the Ascension, Jesus gave His followers the gift of the Holy Spirit. It's a gift to enable them to serve in this interim period. It anticipates the gift of the Holy Spirit that's integral to the New Covenant and the Kingdom, but it doesn't indicate that we're in the era of the New Covenant or the Kingdom. The New Covenant and the Kingdom are for Israel, and they are yet future. Peter's sermon in Acts 2 is to bring into the group of disciples more people prepared to be in the imminent Kingdom. That's the whole work of the Spirit in the Book of Acts. Acts concludes with Paul continuing that work of preparing people to be in the Kingdom. How? By believing in Jesus, the promised One, the promised King. The work of the Church during this era is to seek those who will be in the Kingdom and to prepare them for it by being sanctified and serving Christ. Those 3,000 Jews who responded to Peter's sermon in Acts 2 expected Jesus to return in glory and to be with Him in the Kingdom – in their lifetime. That was the immediate expectation in Peter's sermon in Acts 3. And I suspect that the believers in that primal church shared their assets (Acts 4) in anticipation of the imminent Kingdom. The dreadful loss of life for Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) meant that, dead, they would not be able to participate in the imminent Kingdom. Paul's taking the Gospel to the world of Gentiles was to fulfill the prophet's vision of the Gentiles worshipping Israel's future exalted King. Paul understood that his work was to prepare people for the Kingdom, and that would include Gentiles. Thus the last sentence in Acts, "Boldly and without hindrance he [Paul] preached the kingdom of God [the goal of believing] and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ."

The horror that the author of Hebrews had, that caused him to write his Letter, was that his believing Jewish brethren would abandon the hope of participating in the promised kingdom by returning to the old, superseded Temple and Law. He doesn't anywhere mention Jesus as King. Yet it must have been understood by all that to return to Judaism was to remain in the era of shadows that only anticipated the future glorious Kingdom era, which was directly ahead of them. He writes, "Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe" (Hebrews 12:28). In Revelation, John writes that Jesus holds forth the vision of the coming Kingdom as the compelling reason for the 7 churches to be faithful to Him and not compromise with nor accommodate to the surrounding Satanic world system.

Yet, in a certain sense, the kingdom is now. In any period of Scripture, the faithful are expected to live out in their particular era God's promises regarding the future. That's the argument of Hebrews 11. Thus, it's expected that we, today, will live as if we're in the future kingdom. That's why Paul writes, "The kingdom of God. . . is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). Our lives now should prefigure or foreshadow the glorious future that's next to come. It's how we show and proclaim our confident trust in God's Word; it's how we demonstrate our commitment.

In our churches today, almost all preaching and teaching, besides imparting information from the Bible, focuses on the forgiveness of sins and a rescue from hell so as to be, instead, in heaven when we die. Redemption. So we pursue our lives as if there's no millennial kingdom coming – as if there's *nothing* coming – for which we need to be prepared. But in reality, we're saved to be participants in the next era in God's great plan for His creation, the millennial Kingdom. We're going to return with the King and, for a thousand years, be integrally involved in His world-wide, righteous rule. My readers should think carefully about the parables of the talents (Matthew 25, especially v. 23) and of the wedding banquet (Matthew 22, especially vv. 11-13), in which (it seems) that faithfulness *now* determines responsibilities in the future kingdom, or even being in it. So now, in this life, we need to be actively and obediently living out the teachings and commands of Christ as well as all the instruction in the rest of the New Testament so as to be fully prepared and ready. And in love as well as duty seeking others so that they can unite with the King and participate as well.