

The Kingdom of God

“Thy kingdom come . . . ” (Matthew 6:10a).

“I tell you the truth, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born again” (John 3:3, also v. 5).

The nature of the Kingdom of God separates Christianity into two distinct theological traditions, dispensationalism (or premillennialism) and covenantalism (or amillennialism). The disagreement between these two has to do with whether the Kingdom of God is earthly and future (the dispensationalist view), or spiritual and present now (the covenantalist view). It's a difficult subject because Scripture seems to support both views. It seems that only theologian Walt Kaiser Jr. has ever advanced the notion that both are true. I shall attempt to affirm that here. It may be (from Kaiser's insight) that the Kingdom of God in the New Testament has 2 senses, a soteriologic sense (exemplified by John 3:3) as well as an eschatologic sense (as in, for example, Matthew 6:10a). But there's much more about God's Kingdom program to think about. Let's discuss the Kingdom of God.

As Creator, God owns His creation; it's His and He's free to use it for His purposes and to dispose of it or any part of it as He pleases. He also rules it in absolute sovereignty. That rule is universal and permanent (Daniel 4:3 and Psalm 103:19, for example) and just (Deuteronomy 32:4). The opening verse in Genesis is that God began by creating two places, His own place (heaven) and a physical place for His creatures (earth). So God rules His entire creation from His throne in heaven. For reasons and purposes of His own, He permits (for now) evil in His creation. But His decrees are necessarily fulfilled, and His standards are revealed and enforced.

But there's something else: At creation, God also ordained that His physical world was to be governed as a theocracy. Adam was made to be God's image so that he would rule creation on God's behalf, as if he were God's vice-regent on earth. This would be a “mediated” kingdom in that Adam was the mediator of the Kingdom, with authority delegated to him to rule and responsible to God.

Adam forfeited his role due to the Fall. Nevertheless, this program of both a heavenly rule and a mediatorial rule will express itself in biblical history. The Kingdom of God will be instantiated in two forms, a universal Kingdom, in which God from heaven rules His cosmos absolutely, and a mediated Kingdom in which God's image (i.e., a certain human) rules this world in God's stead.

The universal Kingdom includes people.* The Kingdom isn't God sitting on a throne in a heavenly throne room governing His world. God created this world in love to share His Being with creatures able to experience the blessing of being with Him for an eternity. So, in the eras or dispensations prior to the Incarnation of the Son, individuals who know God and submit to His authority by trust and humble obedience to His revealed will, enter this universal Kingdom of God. Chief features of the universal Kingdom of God include righteousness and peace. Enoch, Noah, Job, the Patriarchs, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Joshua . . . it's a long, long list of individuals who became citizens of the universal Kingdom. Gentiles are included in this list, too, for example, Rahab, Ruth, the Queen of Sheba, Naaman, and perhaps the Ninevites who repented at the testimony of Jonah. It would include the Gentile proselytes who came to know and love God of the Jews during the period of the Exile.

The mediatorial kingdom issues from the universal one (for example, see Daniel 7:13-14) in specific eras or dispensations. It is established by power (Psalm 2; Isaiah 9,11; Daniel 2; and Zechariah 14). Human government, ordained at the end of the Flood (Genesis 9), is a form of mediatorial rule. The Abrahamic Covenant, including a promise of kings who would bring great blessing, anticipated a mediated Kingdom. The Monarchy in Israel was a mediatorial kingdom. The future, Messianic millennial kingdom is a mediatorial kingdom. At the end of history, the Messianic mediatorial kingdom will merge into the universal Kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:24).

* I define “kingdom” as both (a) a geopolitical entity and as (b) a non-physical realm. Thus Israel's Monarchy and the prophesied Messianic Kingdom are in the sense of (a): Entities with physical territory with borders, a capitol city, and physically present king and subjects. The universal Kingdom is in the sense of (b): A realm or domain in which people know God and honor Him by fulfilling His will; God is pre-eminent in their lives. In this sense, all creation is binary, Satan's “kingdom” being the default realm for humanity.

The Kingdom program is a major theme of all Scripture, parallel to (though not quite synonymous with) the theme of redemption. It's God's great project of bringing His beloved human creatures into *koinonia*, into intimate relationship with himself for blessing, for life. Let's go deeper now.

At Sinai, God took the people of Israel for Himself. He would be their God, unlike the gods who ruled the pagan Gentile nations. Reprising God's creational role for Adam, God was taking Israel to be His mediator to take the knowledge of Him to all the dispersed Gentile nations. I presume that individual Gentiles who responded to Israel's testimony and revelation of the true God would enter the universal Kingdom of God. But in fear (terror, actually; Exodus 20), the people at Sinai demanded instead that they have a mediator. Israel tragically failed to fulfill their mediatorial role (except at the Jonah episode).

In 1 Samuel, a crisis erupted regarding leadership of the people. There was confusion about who would rule Israel, God Himself from heaven, or a human mediator, a king. Earlier, Gideon had wisely, insightfully stated, when the Israelites sought to make him king, **"I will not rule over you . . . the Lord will rule over you"** (Judges 8:23). And later, when the Israelites again sought a king to rule over them, the Lord told Samuel, **"they have rejected Me as their King"** (1 Samuel 8:7b). Samuel testified regarding Israel's demand for a king, **"You said to me, 'we want a king to rule over us'—even though the Lord your God was your king"** (1 Samuel 12:12). Rejecting God's universal Kingdom rule, the people wanted a king like all the Gentile nations had. And God gave them a king. He established a Monarchy for Israel, but it was not like what the Gentile nations had. Israel's Monarchy was unique. It was a *theocratic* Kingdom in that the King represented God, served God on His behalf as His vice-regent, and was responsible to God. The king received revelation from God thru His prophets and was expected to obey. And there was a corporate unity between the king and the people. If the king was good, the people were blessed and prospered. If the king was evil, the people suffered under God's fierce indignation. It was a mediated kingdom, an instantiation of the Kingdom of God. It reprised the mediatorial arrangement that was intended at Creation. The intent was that Israel's blessings would lead them to testify to the Gentile nations so that they too might respond appropriately. Sadly, just as failure had occurred in the Garden, Israel's theocratic kingdom failed.

In response to all that failure, Israel's writing prophets foretold of a future Kingdom that not only would not fail but would endure forever. It would be a time of peace and righteousness. The king would be Davidic, that is, submitted to God. And blessing would be so great that it would extend secondarily even to the Gentile nations. A future repentant and regenerated Israel will enter and serve God in that new, glorious Kingdom. All saints from all eras who are in the universal Kingdom will participate in that eschatologic Kingdom.

At the time of Christ, the people of Judah all held the understanding that a super-powerful Messiah-King would come to deliver them from the dominion of Rome so that they would be an autonomous nation, as during the Monarchy. Daniel and the other prophets had predicted this, and they were convinced that God would do it for them; it was, they supposed, their entitlement. Wrong! Jesus came to offer the Kingdom, yes, but with conditions. Jesus told Nicodemus that he could not be in the Kingdom unless he was 'born again.' And John the Baptist preached the need for repentance to be in the kingdom. Jesus demanded sacrificial, selfless commitment to himself. Entrance into the Kingdom of God was for those who in humility desired God, loved God, and would be submitted to His authority. Entrance into the Kingdom was for those who acknowledged and believed in Jesus, the Incarnate Son.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus refers almost 60 times to the Kingdom. All Jesus' teachings, sermons and parables are with reference to the Kingdom, the prophesied mediated Kingdom. The rejection of Jesus and the cross were necessary (and predicted too, but everyone missed that) to make people fit to be in the prophesied Kingdom. There could be no such perfect Kingdom unless its citizens were submitted to God's authority and will.

But in the rest of the New Testament, the term "Kingdom of God" is often used in a different sense. The Book of Acts refers to the Kingdom 8 times, and the term appears more than 15 times in the rest of the New Testament. In the minds of the New Testament authors, the Kingdom is both a present and a future reality. (In many uses, it's ambiguous, not clear which is in view.) A present reality?

Thus, for example, Philip preached, **“the good news of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ”** (Acts 8:12); In Ephesus, Paul argued persuasively in the synagogue about the Kingdom of God, but some refused to believe (Acts 19:8). At Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:24-27), he said he’d testified to the Gospel of God’s grace, preached the kingdom, and proclaimed the will of God. At Rome, Paul declared to the Jews there **“the Kingdom of God and about Jesus from the Law and Prophets”** (Acts 20:23), and Acts ends stating that for 2 years at Rome Paul boldly preached the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus (20:31). To the Colossians, Paul wrote, **“He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves”** (1:13). The author of Hebrews writes, **“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful”** (12:28). John writes, **“I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos . . .** (Revelation 1:9). These references to the Kingdom are surely to be understood as meaning that the Kingdom is now, being in some way expressed in or by the Church.

Yet, many references exist certainly indicating that the Kingdom is yet future. Jesus said, for example, **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom . . . Many will say to me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord’ . . .”** (Matthew 7:21-22). And, **“I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven”** [referring to the rock in Daniel 2, which brings the Times of the Gentiles to an end and begins the eternal Kingdom of God, and especially to the vision in Daniel 7:13-14]. See also Luke 21:24b (note the “until”); 2 Timothy 4:1; and Revelation 12:10, and others.

How do we put this together? How is the Kingdom of God both a present and a future reality? I suggest that, in the New Testament, the term “Kingdom of God” is shorthand for Gospel soteriology.* It refers to being in God’s Kingdom program and all that that involves, namely: presently by identifying with the King, as well as in the future by participating in the prophetic kingdom. I’ll try now to unpack this difficult concept.

Jesus is God. Therefore, to respond to Jesus as Scripture expects, with love and submission to His authority, is certainly to enter *at least* the universal Kingdom of God. Gentiles who likewise respond to the Gospel enter that Kingdom of God. Our unique relationship with the eternal Son in an intimate union means we partake of the divine nature, enjoy access to the Father, are regenerated, justified, adopted, sanctified and glorified, and anticipate being forever in His presence (eternal life). These are Kingdom blessings.

Too, Jesus is the “seed” that fulfills the Abrahamic covenant of extending blessing to humanity. Jesus also is the personal embodiment of a loyal and obedient Israel. And His followers are united to Him as one body. So they fulfill the mediatorial role for which Abraham and Israel were called, taking the offer of being in the Kingdom of God to all of God’s beloved human creatures. We serve God because we’re united to Him by the Spirit to the eternal Son. Jesus is also the righteous, obedient 2nd Adam and the ultimate promised son of David. So being *in Christ* participates with Him in fulfilling the role being a mediatorial king. Union with Christ brings Kingdom responsibilities as well as the blessings of salvation. We enter, and live as if in the mediatorial Kingdom, now, by being one with Christ, although it won’t be until the future when that earthly Kingdom is realized.

So as well as being both universal and mediatorial, the Kingdom of God is soteriologic and eschatologic. It’s soteriologic in the sense that to enter it one must be saved by being *in Christ*, and it’s where such people receive salvation’s blessings. And it’s eschatologic in the sense that it fulfills God’s creational intent by restoring a cursed creation, and restoring a fallen but redeemed humanity and a failed but restored Israel (and a failed monarchy) to serve Him. That we’re now in the Kingdom of God is positional truth in the same sense as Colossians 3:1.**

* Many terms in Scripture are shorthand in that they substitute for, or encompass, much more meaning that the expositor needs to unpack. Thus, for example, “believe” (or faith) is shorthand for everything that Deuteronomy insists is our appropriate response to God, including love, trust, obey, serve, fear, and be loyal and committed. Redemption is another shorthand word, so is eternal life.

** The New Testament contains much positional truth. Our body, for example, is dead (Romans 8:10); we’ve been crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20); and we’ve been set free from sin (Romans 6:18). Truth is timeless so it is eternally (even retroactively) operative.

So, is the Church the Kingdom of God? Those in the Church who are following Jesus are in the universal Kingdom of God; they are necessarily kingdom citizens. But there's more: They identify with Jesus the anointed exalted King. And in God's kingdom program, there's corporate unity between the King and His subjects. So those following Jesus, by their intimate union with Him, are positionally also in the mediatorial Kingdom, although that Kingdom won't materialize until His glorious Return. Since the Incarnation and redemptive work of the eternal Son, the Kingdom of God is everything that pertains to salvation.

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Now, why all this discussion? The Kingdom program is not merely an interesting doctrine or theme of Scripture. It is actually of greatest importance to us. That's because a Kingdom is enstructured authority. Authority means the will of the King is *enforced*. Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and earth. He has authority over us. His words, His teachings (including the parables), and His commands are all binding on His Kingdom citizens. The hortatory sections of the New Testament are there because we're responsible for living them, for incorporating them into our character. One day, we'll be held accountable to Jesus for our response to His Word. Our response to His Word, after all, is our response to Him, the King. We need to know Jesus' words and live them. We dare not presume upon grace.

Let's conclude. I have presented my understanding of God's great Kingdom program. I need now to point out that covenantalists have erred in denying the future earthly rule of Christ.* They have grasped the spiritual or soteriologic nature of the Kingdom but, because of their faulty typological hermeneutic, they have misinterpreted the promises that are in the Hebrew Scriptures of Israel's future restoration.** And they have failed to understand the New Testament references to the future Kingdom.*** Covenantalists also have taught the Church that when we die, we go to heaven for an eternity. Wrong. We go to heaven in resurrection bodies only temporarily to be glorified and to await the Day of the Lord, when we will return to earth with the exalted Jesus to reign with Him for 1,000 years and then in the New Heavens and New Earth, which are real, physical structures.

Dispensationalists too have erred. They correctly use a literal sense hermeneutic to interpret the Hebrew Scriptures and so understand that Israel has been promised a glorious future, and that the Church is distinct from Israel. But they err in failing to grasp the great Kingdom program that God is unfolding thru the ages, so that entry into God's kingdom is on offer now, in the Gospel.

So let's live now, in this present existence, fully committed to Jesus and to His authority.

* There must be a millennial kingdom *on earth*! That's because God's goodness must be vindicated. The goodness of the Son had to be vindicated by a physical or bodily resurrection. In the same way, the goodness of God's creation and of His image-bearers must be vindicated by a resurrection of sorts, that is, a re-creation or restoration of this physical earth and physically embodied humans. Consider: (a) God as Creator is not and cannot currently be exalted as He deserves to be, because of His curse on His creation. There must be a renewed, "very good," physical creation here on Earth with the curse removed, so that God as Creator is vindicated. (b) Humans don't exalt God as they should because of sinfulness. It appears as if evil is in total control. Humanity, His image, also has to be vindicated. God must be exalted here, on a restored physical earth, by a redeemed, embodied humanity. And (c) the existence of evil in God's creation powerfully impugns God's goodness. So evil (Satan, demons, and an unrepentant, God-hating, sin-obsessed humanity) must be expunged from earth. God's goodness must be vindicated in the very arena where Satan was loosed, that is, Earth. Otherwise, it really looks as if God is impotent, unable to deal with evil, nor with Satan, nor with sin.

** When God promises something (and the Hebrew Scriptures are full of precious promises) He must intend for us to interpret the text literally. Walking thru the pieces (Genesis 15) means God intends for us to take Him at His word literally. If we interpret promises typologically, allegorically or "spiritually," we nullify God's purposes.

*** It is impossible to explain away the explicit statement that Satan is to be bound and removed from earth's society for 1,000 years (Revelation 20). It cannot be allegorized, nor can it be applied to this Church Age. The figure of "one thousand years" is stated 6 times in 7 verses, so the number cannot be explained away either. The passage simply *has* to be understood literally. The Revelation 20:1-7 passage absolutely falsifies the covenantalist's amillennialism. Scriptures such as Romans 11:2,11, 21,26, and 29 refute also the covenantalist's claim that there's no future restoration for Israel.