

Thy Kingdom Come

by Kim Riddlebarger

The kingdom of God is a present reality and a future hope, referring to God's rule or reign, and Christians are to participate in its advance through all of their 'spiritual' activity.

Scripture: Luke 17:20

Topics: "Kingdom Of God", "Eschatology"

Description

Kim Riddlebarger delves into the profound concept of the kingdom of God, exploring the tension between its present reality and future fulfillment. He contrasts various Christian views on the end times, highlighting the impact these views have on believers' engagement with the world. Riddlebarger emphasizes the importance of understanding the kingdom of God as a spiritual entity, not limited to earthly structures or ministries, and the need to balance the 'already' and 'not-yet' aspects of the kingdom's advancement.

Transcript

The second petition of our Lord's Prayer is a simple and yet dramatic one: "Thy Kingdom come." Our Lord tells us that we are to pray that God's kingdom (literally, God's rule, or reign) come in some sense in which God's kingdom is not already present. Here we catch a glimpse of one of the most important, though difficult, concepts in all of scripture, and that is the kingdom of God and the relationship that this divine kingdom has to both the present course of human history and to our Lord's return in the future. The tension between the present and the future aspects of the kingdom of God is described by Reformed theologians as the tension between the "already," that is, the present aspects of the kingdom of God, and the "not-yet," of the future aspects of that same kingdom.

It should come as no surprise that a Christian's particular view of endtimes and the return of our Lord Jesus Christ will have a dramatic effect upon how they understand the relationship between the present reality of the kingdom of God and their own involvement in the world around them. Indeed, a Christian's view of end times will dramatically color their understanding of our Lord's words, "Thy kingdom come." A Christian, for example, who adopts a pessimistic view of the world's future, and who sees the world as merely the stage for the outbreak of end-times apostasy within the church, the rise of Antichrist, and a tremendous increase in evil as predicted in holy scripture, will very naturally tend to view the world around them as an evil place, simply awaiting judgment and destruction. The world and the unbelievers who inhabit it will ultimately be destroyed, because the world and the people in it are evil. In this pessimistic scenario, the kingdom of God, if seen as present in this age in any sense, has virtually no impact upon the

decline of world conditions, and has virtually no function in restraining the rising tide of evil. Many Christians would argue, therefore, that the kingdom of God must be an entirely future reality and is not present now in any sense. And so, when our Lord prays "thy kingdom come" he is asking that we pray that his kingdom, which is not a p[resent reality, come in its fullness at some point yet ahead in the future.

Those influenced by dispensationalism, with its untenable doctrine of a pre-tribulational rapture, anticipate the removal of believers from the earth before the great seven-year tribulation period supposedly begins. In this scheme, the primary focus of the church's involvement in the world shifts to evangelism, since the world will soon be subject to tremendous evil due to the rise of Antichrist and the bowl and trumpet judgments of the Apocalypse. The church's mission is that of Noah—to rescue as many lost souls as possible from the coming end and their ultimate destruction. Implicit within this system are depreciated roles assigned for ecological stewardship, reform of injustice in society, political involvement, as well as a marked diminishing of the doctrine of calling, or vocation, which is each individual's divinely assigned role in fulfilling their God-given mandate to produce Christian culture through one's job, family life, and other such "secular" activity. Instead, high value is assigned to "full-time Christian service," and other such tasks specifically oriented towards evangelism, and the creation of a Christian sub-culture designed to insulate Christians from the increasing worldliness and evil associated with the impending end.

Dispensationalists argue that when Jesus came in his first advent he brought to the Jews an "offer" of the kingdom, which the Jews subsequently rejected. Jesus, having his plans frustrated by the sovereignty of man then withdrew his offer of the kingdom until such time as God will remove believing Gentiles from the earth in the rapture. The kingdom of God has been withdrawn and its arrival awaits our Lord's return. The millennial age, set up on earth after the return of Christ will see the kingdom of God manifest in its fullness, as Jesus physically rules the nations with a rod of iron. Thus, the kingdom of God has little or nothing to do with the present age. Instead, the kingdom is often seen as arriving in its fullness in the millennial age, and our Lord's instructions focus entirely upon the kingdom which has been withdrawn coming back in fullness in the future.

On the other hand, those Christians who view the world more optimistically, often tend to see the world itself as the theater of God's redemptive activity, which accordingly extends to all spheres of life, including political, cultural, and social arenas. Involvement in Christianizing the world before Christ returns as the primary mission of the church and the hallmark of true piety. Therefore, the present reality and advance of the kingdom of God is often identified with the task of transforming a given culture, society, or nation. Transformation of the world through vocation, cultural engagement, and political activism is often identified as "kingdom work" by those who see the kingdom of God in this manner.

Though historically present in American Evangelicalism in its more optimistic periods, the recent Evangelical fascination with the eschatology of postmillennialism comes at a time when many Evangelicals are increasingly pessimistic about the future. This is especially true after the election of Bill Clinton, whose victory was seen as a resounding defeat for the Christian right. Ironically, many who eschew the postmillennial label for the more widely accepted premillennialism of American fundamentalism, nevertheless, are functionally postmillennial in their view of the kingdom of God. When seen from this perspective, a Christian's involvement in this world is championed as the distinctly churchly and Christian activity. The goal is the complete Christianization of civil government, culture and society in general, and the means is any and all available to the Christian, whether that be the political, cultural, economic, or even religious. Various evils in society, such as pornography, abortion on demand, and the like, are to be rooted out at every possible turn. The church should use every possible means to

accomplish these ends, extending all the way from the pacifist approach of simple prayer vigils to the more militant approach of physically obstructing entrances to abortion clinics. The Kingdom of God is advanced through the church's "kingdom activity" here on this earth.

The primary focus of such an eschatological viewpoint is upon the moral improvement of the world in anticipation of Christ's return. Since our Lord's coming may or may not be imminent in this scheme, those holding to this optimistic view will ask themselves, "To what kind of a world, and a moral mess will our Lord return?" "Have we really done all that we can do?" "How do we build the kingdom of God on this earth?" "Can our own efforts usher in our Lord's return?" And so, when our Lord instructs us to pray, "Thy kingdom come," the focus is upon the triumph of Christ's kingdom, now, in this age, over all forces that oppose it.

The optimistic and pessimistic tendencies are present in modern American Evangelicalism. And quite surprisingly, they both views seem to exist simultaneously in many circles, even though the contradictions inherent within these two views create an almost intolerable tension. But since when was doctrinal clarity and precision a mark of the American Evangelical? Thus, many of God's people are forced to live on the mixed diet of conflicting sermons focusing on the rapture and an escape from it all on one Sunday, and then hearing that we must take Washington, DC back from the "Hollywood types" the next. In either case, what happens to the meaning of our Lord's words "thy kingdom come"? The meaning of the text gets pushed into the background.

Clearly, there is a great deal that rings true about both of these views. But there is also something definitely amiss about them as well. How can I deny the present reality of the kingdom of God, as the dispensationalists so easily do, when the scriptures clearly teach the present reality of that kingdom (Mt. 3:2; Mk. 1:15; with Lk. 11:20 and Mt. 12:28)? On the other hand, I find myself asking just exactly whose kingdom is this that we are talking about? In the Lord's prayer, we need to recall, Jesus prays that his Father's kingdom come. This kingdom, we are told elsewhere, is not visible and is entirely within us (Lk. 17:20-21). What is my role as an individual believer, and how does the church's corporate role as the body of Christ relate to this kingdom? For the scriptures also declare that this kingdom is not political. In fact, we are told that this kingdom is not even of this world (Jn. 18:36). It is a kingdom that is not a matter of "eating and drinking, but of righteousness and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). Therefore, such a kingdom will not have a flag, an address, or a world headquarters.

In addition, how am I to deal with the fact that both Paul (2 Thes. 2) and John (Rev. 20) anticipate a great rebellion and cataclysmic upheaval of evil and apostasy immediately before the return of Christ to judge the world? Christians have thought long and hard about these questions, and the answer is to be found, in part, by returning to the historic and biblical eschatology of Protestant orthodoxy.

One helpful aspect of this historic eschatology (sometimes known as amillennialism, or "present millennialism") is the distinction made between the doctrines of redemption and creation. Simply stated, the doctrine of creation tells us that the world as created by God was good. It was the Fall of Adam that subjected the world to futility (Rom. 8:20), and in fact, one of the great promises that Paul sets out in Romans 8 is that the world itself will someday be redeemed at Christ's return to earth (8:21). Therefore, it must be pointed out that the world has evil in it due to the fact that sinful men and women walk about upon it, and not because the material world itself is evil. The language in scripture concerning the coming destruction of the world is always connected to express declarations that the world will be re-created in a "new" heaven and earth (2 Pt. 3:10-13).

Therefore, Christians should see those aspects of the doctrine of creation, such as universal human dignity (because God has created all men and women in His image), involvement in civil affairs, the institution of marriage and the sanctity of the family, the need for ecological stewardship of the earth's natural resources and beauty, the importance of calling and vocation, and the creation of culture as parts of the doctrine of creation, not redemption, and therefore, as being good in and of themselves.

A Christian's concerted involvement in all of these vital activities is good and necessary. Thus, the Christian along with the rest of humanity should not hate the world but instead, love the world and strive to participate in creation to the fullest. We must remember that a primary aspect of eschatological expectation is that God Himself will redeem and restore the world, an expectation which is to give the Christian hope that one day all will be right. There is biblical optimism on this point, regarding a Christian's participation in that which belongs to the doctrine of creation. But since the focus here is on creation, we must be careful not to confuse it with the kingdom of God which is expressly related to redemption.

There is another aspect of biblical data and historic eschatology that is also extremely important to keep in view. Christians know that an historical Fall did take place in an historical individual named Adam who represented all of humanity. And thus, a Christian must see the world as fallen in Adam. There is truly a biblical pessimism about the world associated with the reality and gravity of sin. Weeds grow in gardens where they once did not. Sweat forms on the brow where it once did not. Women travail in giving birth, when they once did not. There will be wars and rumors of wars. Loved ones will perish without Christ.

Christians must realize that there is great evil residing deep in every human heart, and that because of this fact, the creation itself is said to be subject to frustration. Things do not work as they should. There is death, sin, and material decay everywhere. Therefore, there is the constant need to work to restrain the evil in the human heart, to work to restore what is in a continual state of decay, and to constantly work to undo the great injustice that exists in society because of fallen human nature. Thus, Christians are not only to engage in such "churchly" tasks as evangelism, but they are also to function as "salt" and "light" in the restraint of evil by fulfilling their roles assigned them through the doctrine of creation.

And yet, the Christian need not ultimately be a pessimist, even if he is pessimistic about human nature; for paradoxically, they know that this battle, however hard and justly they fight against evil, cannot be won, and will not be won until Jesus Christ Himself returns to earth to raise his own from the dead, and to restore all things. There is no doubt that Jesus Christ is coming again and he will restore all things when he does return. The final outcome of human history is therefore, quite secure, and there is no need to be an eschatological pessimist, even if one is realistic about sin and the human condition. His kingdom will come as this petition in the Lord's Prayer is answered with an awesome finality! God will redeem his people, and therefore, this kingdom of God must be seen as a present reality, advancing through the spiritual ministry of Christ's church through the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

But the Scriptures also exhort Christians to be in the world, and yet not of the world. There is the sense in which we must see ourselves as pilgrims, awaiting the summing up of all things in Jesus Christ. Our ultimate home is to be the new heavens and the new earth, and not in the earthly existence that we now know. One reason for this focus is that the creation itself is not to be worshipped, for it testifies to the God who made it. And even in its fallen condition the world bears compelling testimony to the fact that a day is coming when God will come in Jesus Christ to restore all things. Thus we must operate under the correct biblical assumptions that our involvement as Christians in this world really matters; and therefore, in a sense we are to be optimistic about our duties as Christians.

But we must also be realistic, for all of our efforts cannot ultimately usher in the kingdom of God and a new and redeemed earth. The scriptures assign this role to the Creator at his return. Therefore, we must be careful not to identify our ultimate commitment to this world and the evil that resides within its inhabitants. These things will perish. Nevertheless, God has decreed that our involvement in this world and our prayers on its behalf really do make this life a bit better in the meantime by restraining evil and serving as the means God uses to bring redemption in the midst of increasing evil. From our perspective, our involvement does change things. We can participate in the evangelism of the world.

On a limited scale we can see injustice remedied, the homeless fed and clothed, and the rape of the earth undone while we await our Lord's return. For where the redemptive kingdom advances, God's people will function as "salt and light" in the secular world around them. Thus, there is a realistic appraisal of the world and the human condition, and hope that our efforts do make a difference based upon the knowledge that our Lord will come back to set all things right.

God's Kingdom Will Come!

Another vital aspect of historic eschatology relates to our understanding of the nature of the kingdom of God. We must be clear that the kingdom we pray to come is not ours, nor brought by our efforts. It is God's rule, or reign, to which we refer when we speak of the "kingdom of God." It is something that God extends, God brings, and God controls. Yet God is pleased to use us, his people, in the process of the unrelenting advance of His kingdom. Thus, this kingdom cannot be seen as a geo-political or national entity (such as the nation-state of Israel, or even our own America), nor as a material one such as a place or building, nor as a particular ministry or denomination. But let us not lose sight of the rest of the biblical data which declares this kingdom as a real and powerful kingdom, ultimately conquering all of God's enemies in the appointed time (1 Cor. 15:23-28).

Christians must balance this tension between the all-conquering kingdom on the one hand, and evil (constantly increasing before the end) on the other. One way in which the historic eschatology of the Reformation has done this is with the helpful motif of the "already" and the "not-yet." The scriptures declare that the kingdom has come. We live in the light of its benefits. That is, we possess the "already" elements of this kingdom. It is advancing unceasingly even now. We participate in the advance of the kingdom of God through all of our "spiritual" activity.

But this kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, and it does not occupy any specific geographical location, nor does it take visible form. Its advance is directly connected to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament in and through Christ's church. And the very nature of this kingdom and its constant advance is to provoke the ever-present evil in the world to violent wrath. Physical evil has not yet been fully destroyed, as it will be when our Lord returns to this earth to judge the quick and the dead. Thus, there is a sense in which we eagerly await the coming of our Lord to finally put an end to evil and human suffering, to create the new heavens and earth, and to raise up our mortal bodies for glorious ones as our Lord possessed in His resurrection. This is what is known as the "not-yet" that for which we eagerly wait.

This is why our Lord expressly instructed us to pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done." For it is not until Christ returns and His kingdom is visible in His physical reign on His redeemed heaven and earth, when every tear has been wiped away and there is no night, that our work and involvement as Christians in service to our Master and His kingdom will finally cease and we will enter into the eternal Sabbath rest, of which we have had but a taste in this life.

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