

What Does the Bible Say About the Kingdom of God?

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THE PRESENT AND FUTURE KINGDOM OF GOD

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed the nearness of God’s kingdom (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15). The long-awaited rule of God was near. This message was called the gospel, the *good* news. Thousands of people were glad to hear this, and many responded to this message of John and Jesus.

But consider for a moment what the response would have been like if Jesus had preached, “The kingdom of God is 2,000 years away.” This would not have been *news*, nor perceived as all that *good*. The message would have been disappointing, and public response would also have been disappointing. Jesus may not have been popular, Jewish religious leaders might not have been jealous, and Jesus might not have been crucified.

However, John and Jesus preached a kingdom that was near in time to their audiences. The message said something about what people should do *now*; it had immediate relevance and urgency. It aroused interest—and jealousy. The message challenged the *status quo* and implied that changes were needed in civil government, in religious teachings, and in personal behavior

First-century Jewish expectations

Many first-century Jews could identify with the phrase “kingdom of God.” They eagerly wanted God to send them a leader who would throw off Roman rule and make Judea an independent nation again—a nation of righteousness, glory and blessings, a nation everyone would be attracted to. There was a variety of speculations about how this would be done. The concept was attractive, although it was not very well defined.

In this cultural longing for national restoration, John and Jesus preached

the nearness of God's kingdom. Mid-way through Jesus' earthly ministry, the message continued. He told his disciples to preach "The kingdom of heaven has come near" and to heal the sick (Matthew 10:7; cf. Luke 10:9, 11).

But the kingdom most people hoped for did not happen. The Jewish nation was not restored. Even worse, the temple was destroyed and the Jews were scattered. Even now, 2000 years later, the Jewish hopes are *still* unfulfilled. Was Jesus wrong in his prediction, or was he *not* predicting a national kingdom?

Well, we do not believe that Jesus was wrong. Rather, the popular hopes and speculations were wrong. Jesus' kingdom was *not* like the popular expectation—as we might guess from the fact that many Jews wanted to kill him. His kingdom was "not of this world" (John 18:36). When he talked about the "kingdom of God," Jesus used a phrase the people knew, but he was giving it *a different meaning*. He told Nicodemus that God's kingdom was invisible to most people (John 3:3)—to understand it or experience it, a person must be renewed by God's Spirit (verse 6). The kingdom of God was a spiritual kingdom, not a civil and physical organization.

The word "kingdom" is a metaphor, since the sort of kingdom that Jesus was talking about is not an ordinary kingdom—certainly not like the kingdoms of the first-century world. In his parables, Jesus used a variety of images to explain what the kingdom is "like." The reason he had to use parables was because his listeners did not have the same concept of "kingdom" as he did. "You are thinking that God's plan to rescue the Jewish people is like a kingdom. OK, I will use that word, but I'm going to give you a different way to look at it..."

Present condition of the kingdom

In the Olivet prophecy, Jesus predicted certain signs and apocalyptic events. But some of Jesus' teachings and parables explain that the kingdom does *not* come in a dramatic way. The seed grows quietly (Mark 4:26-29); the kingdom starts as small as a mustard seed (verses 30-32) and is hidden like yeast (Matthew 13:33). These parables suggest that the kingdom is a reality *before* it comes in a powerful and dramatic way. In addition to being a future reality, it has reality right now.

Let's look at some verses that indicate the kingdom is already functioning. After casting out demons, Jesus said, "If it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons [and he did], then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28; Luke 11:20). The kingdom is here, he said, and the proof is in the exorcisms. The power of God is invading the domain of evil, expelling

the powers of evil.

This proof continues in the church today, because the church is doing even greater works than Jesus did (John 14:12). We can also say, “If we cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is working here.” The kingdom of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is continuing to demonstrate its power over the kingdom of Satan – and that power is shown not just in expelling evil spirits, but in many other activities that undo what the devil has done.

Satan still exerts some influence, but he has been defeated, and “the prince of this world now stands condemned” (John 16:11). He has been partially restrained — tied up (Mark 3:27). Jesus overcame Satan’s world (John 16:33), and with God’s help we are overcoming it, too (1 John 5:4). But not everyone does. In this age, the kingdom contains both good and bad, both wheat and tares (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50; 24:45-51; 25:1-12, 14-30). Satan still has influence; we still look forward to a world and a time in which God’s will is done perfectly rather than partially.

“The kingdom of heaven has been coming with violence,” Jesus said (Matthew 11:12, my translation)—and forceful people *are* laying hold of it (present tense). Even in the first century, people were laying hold of the kingdom, which implies that it existed back then. A parallel verse, Luke 16:16, also uses present-tense verbs: “everyone is forcing their way into it.” For now, we don’t need to decide who the forceful people are or why they use force—what is important here is that these verses talk about the kingdom as a present reality.

Luke 16:16 replaces the part of the sentence with “the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached.” This variation suggests that the kingdom’s coming, at least in Luke’s view, is roughly equivalent to its proclamation. The kingdom *is*—it already exists—and it is advancing *by being preached*. “The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God,” Jesus said (Matthew 21:31), and they do it by believing the gospel (verse 32).

“Enter” is a metaphor that implies movement, but the movement is one of allegiance rather than in geography. Actually, the kingdom makes the first “move”—it *comes*, and people are entering it not by changing their location, but *by recognizing the validity* of something that has already come. They could not enter it at all, unless it were already here.

Jesus also implies (and this may be his main point) that God *accepts* them in his kingdom. Their behavior did not qualify them for the kingdom, but they were accepted by grace; they were given a right relationship with the

King. The kingdom would not be good news for ordinary people unless ordinary people could be *part* of that kingdom. It requires grace, mercy, and forgiveness.

In Mark 10:15, Jesus indicates that the kingdom is something we must *receive* in some way, apparently in this life: “Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

Some Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom would come (Luke 17:20). You can’t see it, replied Jesus: “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed.” But he also said, “The kingdom of God is in your midst” (verse 21). Jesus was the King, and because he was teaching and performing miracles among them, the kingdom was among the Pharisees. However, he did not just say that the *King* was among them – he said that the kingdom was, too. It was available for them, just as much as it was for prostitutes, but the Pharisees were not entering.

Jesus Christ is in the church today, too, and just as the kingdom was present in the ministry of Jesus, it is present in the ministry of his church. The King is among us; his spiritual power is in us, even though the kingdom is not yet operating in its full power.

We have already been brought into God’s kingdom (Colossians 1:13). We are already receiving a kingdom, and our proper response is reverence and awe (Hebrews 12:28). Christ “has made us [past tense] to be a kingdom” (Revelation 1:6). We *are* a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9)—already and currently a holy kingdom—but it does not yet appear what we shall be. God has rescued us from the dominion of sin and transferred us into his kingdom, under his ruling authority.

The kingdom of God is *here*, Jesus said. His audience did not need to wait for a conquering Messiah—God is already ruling, and we should be living his way now. We don’t yet possess a territory, but we do come under the *reign* of God.

The kingdom of God is *here*, Jesus said. But *how* is the kingdom present? The details are not yet clear, but the verses we have looked at say it *is* present. His audience did not need to wait for a conquering Messiah—God is already ruling, and we should be sharing in the divine life right now, living in his domain, in which his will is done. We don’t yet possess a territory, but we do come under the *reign* of God. The kingdom does not force itself upon us – we have to *voluntarily* come under its influence.

Understanding that the kingdom already exists can help us give greater attention to the way the world is right now. We do not forget that the completion of the kingdom is still future. If our only hope is in this age, we

don't have much hope (1 Corinthians 15:19). We do not harbor illusions about bringing the kingdom with human efforts. Nevertheless, even though *we* cannot transform this earth into a heavenly paradise, doing good is still good. We can still try to make the world a better place for at least a few people. This is part of what it means for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

The kingdom of God is yet future

When we suffer setbacks and persecutions, when we see that most people reject the gospel, we gain strength from the knowledge that the fullness of the kingdom is in a future age. And when we try to make the world a better place but encounter setbacks along the way, we do not give up, but take comfort in the fact that good will prevail in the end.

No matter how much we try to live in a way that reflects God and his kingdom – and we should try – we cannot transform the entire world into God's kingdom. Perfection will come only through divine intervention. Dramatic miracles are needed to usher in the new age. Satan must be completely restrained, and we can't do that.

Numerous verses tell us that the kingdom of God will be a glorious *future* reality. We know that Christ is a King even now, but we yearn for the day when he will exercise his power in a great and dramatic way to stop human suffering. The book of Daniel predicts a kingdom of God that will rule the earth (Daniel 2:44, 7:13-14, 22); the New Testament Apocalypse describes its arrival (Revelation 11:15, 19:11-16).

We pray for the kingdom to come (Luke 11:2) – but even so, we want God's will to be done now, as well as in the future. The poor in spirit and people who are persecuted await a future “reward in heaven” (Matthew 5:3, 10, 12). People “enter the kingdom” not just now, but also on a future “day” of judgment (Matthew 7:21-23; Luke 13:22-30). Jesus gave one of his parables because some people thought the kingdom would become powerful right away (Luke 19:11).

In the Olivet prophecy, Jesus described dramatic events that would come before his return in power. Shortly before his crucifixion, Jesus looked forward to a kingdom in the future: “I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom” (Matthew 26:29).

Paul speaks several times of “inheriting the kingdom of God” as a future experience (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10; 15:50; Galatians 5:21; cf. Ephesians 5:5), and otherwise indicates by his language that he thinks

of it as realized only at the end of the age (1 Thessalonians 2:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:5; Colossians 4:11; cf. 2 Timothy 4:1, 18). When Paul wants to focus on the present manifestation of the kingdom, he tends either to introduce the term “justice” or “righteousness” along with “kingdom” (Romans 14:17) or in place of it (Romans 1:17; for the close association of the kingdom and the justice of God, see Matthew 6:33), or (alternatively) to connect the kingdom with Jesus Christ rather than God the Father (Colossians 1:13). (J. Ramsey Michaels, “The Kingdom of God and the Historical Jesus,” chapter 8 of *The Kingdom of God in 20th-Century Interpretation*, edited by Wendell Willis [Hendrickson, 1987], page 112)

Some “kingdom” scriptures could apply either to the present kingdom or to the future fulfillment. For example, lawbreakers will be called least in the kingdom (Matthew 5:19-20). That could be true no matter whether the kingdom is now, or in the future. Similarly, we leave families for the sake of the kingdom (Luke 18:29). We enter the kingdom through tribulations (Acts 14:22). These verses could refer to either a present or a future kingdom, but as we have already seen, at least *some* verses are clearly one, and *some* are clearly the other, and both must be held together. It is the same kingdom, both now and in eternity. The kingdom is a paradox, a surprise, a mystery that may be difficult to understand.

After Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples asked him, “Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). How was Jesus to answer such a question? What the disciples meant by *kingdom* was not what Jesus had been teaching. The disciples were still thinking in terms of a nationalistic kingdom rather than a slowly growing family of all ethnic groups. It would take them many years to realize that Gentiles were welcome in the new kingdom. Christ’s kingdom was still not of this world, but it was to be active in this age. So Christ did not say *yes* or *no*—he simply told them there was work to do and power to do it (verses 7-8).

The kingdom of God in the past

Matthew 25:34 tells us that the kingdom has been in preparation since the foundation of the world. It has been in existence all along, albeit in different forms. God was a King to Adam and Eve; he gave them dominion or authority to rule; they were his vice-regents in the Garden of Eden. Although the word “kingdom” is not used, the first humans were essentially in a kingdom of God, under his rule and ownership.

When God promised Abraham that his descendants would become great

nations and that kings would come from him (Genesis 17:5-6), he was, in effect, promising a kingdom of God. But it started small, like yeast hidden in a batch of dough, and it took hundreds of years to be seen for what it was.

When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt and made a covenant with them, they became a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6), a kingdom that belonged to God and could rightly be called a kingdom of God. The covenant he made with them was similar to treaties that ancient empires made with smaller nations. God had saved Israel from slavery, and the Israelites responded—they agreed to be his people, as a nation in his empire. God was their king (1 Samuel 12:12; 8:7). David and Solomon sat on the throne of God, ruling on his behalf (1 Chronicles 29:23). Israel was a kingdom of God.

But the people wouldn't obey their King. God sent them away, but he promised to restore the nation with a new heart (Jeremiah 31:31-33), a prophecy that is being fulfilled in the church today. We who are led by the Holy Spirit are the royal priesthood and holy nation that ancient Israel could not be (1 Peter 2:9, Exodus 19:6).

God has always been a King, and there has always been a kingdom, and there always will be a kingdom. But this one kingdom appears in different ways at different times – it looks one way with Adam and Eve, another way with Abraham. It is transformed again with the nation of Israel, and transformed again with Jesus and the church. We are now in the kingdom, but there are weeds growing in among the grain. At the end of the age, the Messiah will return in power and glory, the weeds will be removed, and the kingdom of God will again be transformed in appearance. The final form of the kingdom, in which *everyone* is perfect and spiritual, will be dramatically different from the millennial one (no matter how you understand the millennium).

Since the kingdom has historical continuity, it is proper to speak of it in past, present and future tenses. In its historical development, it has had and will continue to have major milestones as new phases are established. The kingdom was established at Mt. Sinai; and again in Jesus' ministry; it will be established again at his return and the day of judgment. In each phase, God's people rejoice in what they have and look forward to more yet to come. One phase builds upon the other. As we now experience some limited aspects of the kingdom, we gain confidence that the future kingdom will also be a reality. The Holy Spirit is our guarantee of greater blessings (2 Corinthians 5:5, Ephesians 1:14).

What the kingdom looked like in the past is not what it looked like in Jesus' day, nor what it will look like in the future. In some respects the phrase

“kingdom of God” has different meanings at different times in history. But the fact that the same phrase may be used for the first-century manifestation *and* the future manifestation, causes us to look for a common denominator, something that the kingdom in all ages has in common, despite its dramatically different appearance at different times in history. A more abstract term such as “rule” can be helpful, and indeed, that seems to be what the Greek word *basileia* focuses on.

Jesus told a parable about a man who went to a foreign country to receive *a kingdom* (Luke 19:12, a literal translation). He went not to receive the territory and bring it back with him. Rather, he went to receive *the authority to rule*. The NIV gives the meaning: he went “to have himself appointed king.” He then returned to the territory and had to exert that authority.

The Jews were well acquainted with a historical example: Herod had gone to Rome, seeking to be appointed king. He was so appointed, but when he returned to Judea he had to raise an army and conquer the territory. What he was given in Rome was not the territory, but the permission to be its king. The Greek word *basileia* is focused on authority, not on territory.

The kingdom and the gospel

When we hear the word *kingdom*, we are reminded of the kingdoms of this world, perhaps the kingdoms of medieval Europe. In this world, *kingdom* is associated with authority and power, but not harmony and love. *Kingdom* can describe the authority God has in his family, but it does not describe all the blessings God has in store for us. It is a metaphor, and it cannot convey all that God’s realm is. That’s why other metaphors are used, too, such as the family term *children*, which emphasizes God’s love and authority.

Each term is accurate, but incomplete. If any one term could describe salvation perfectly, I suppose that the Bible would use that term consistently. But all are metaphors, each describing some aspect of salvation—but none of the terms describes the complete picture. When God commissioned the church to preach the gospel, he did not restrict us to using only the phrase “kingdom of God.” The apostles translated Jesus’ sayings from Aramaic to Greek, and they translated them into other metaphors, choosing concepts that were more meaningful to a non-Jewish audience. Matthew, Mark and Luke use “the kingdom” often. John and the epistles also describe our future, but they generally prefer other metaphors to do it.

Salvation is probably the most general term. Paul said we *have been saved* (Ephesians 2:8), *are being saved* (2 Corinthians 2:15) and *shall be saved* (Romans 5:9). The salvation that we already have, just like the kingdom we

are in now, is a foretaste of greater things to come – but it is salvation and kingdom nonetheless. God has given us salvation, and he expects us to respond to him with faith. John wrote of salvation and eternal life as a present reality and possession (1 John 5:11-12) and also a future blessing. We have now a small foretaste of what we will have in the future.

Metaphors such as *salvation* and *family of God*—just as much as *kingdom*—are legitimate although partial descriptions of God’s plan for us. Christ’s gospel can be called the gospel of the kingdom, gospel of salvation, gospel of grace, gospel of God, gospel of eternal life, etc. The gospel is an announcement that we are destined to be in loving relationship with the Father, Son and Spirit forever, and it includes information about this has been made possible—through Jesus Christ our Savior.

When Jesus talked about the kingdom, he didn’t emphasize its physical blessings or clarify its chronology. He focused instead on how people get in that kingdom, and how they live. We enter the kingdom when we respond to God with faith and allegiance, when we come under his authority; we then seek to live in way that is reflective of that kingdom.

In Mark 10, a man wanted to inherit eternal life, and Jesus said he should keep the commandments (verses 17-19). This was apparently just a teaser of an answer, because Jesus soon added another command: He told him to give up all his possessions for the heavenly treasure (verse 21). Jesus commented to the disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” (verse 23). The disciples asked, “Who then can be saved?” (verse 26).

In this passage, and in its parallel (Luke 18:18-30), we see several phrases used to indicate the same thing: receive the kingdom, inherit eternal life, have treasure in heaven, enter the kingdom, be saved. When Jesus said, “follow me” (v. 21), he was using another phrase to indicate the same thing: We enter the kingdom by orienting our life to Jesus – and it is not possible for *us* to do it – but it is possible with God. He makes the impossible possible.

In Luke 12:31-34, Jesus also indicates that several concepts are similar: seeking the kingdom, being given the kingdom, having a heavenly treasure, giving up trust in physical possessions. We seek God’s kingdom by responding to what Jesus taught, and that is also the way that we enter the kingdom. (This is a metaphor of allegiance, not physical movement to a new territory.) God’s kingdom is the realm in which God’s will is done. In Luke 21:28, 30, the kingdom is parallel to redemption.

In Acts 20:21, 24-25, 32, we learn that Paul preached the gospel of the kingdom, and he preached the gospel of God’s grace, repentance and faith. The kingdom is closely connected with eternal life—the kingdom would not

be worth preaching if we couldn't be part of it, and it wouldn't make sense to risk our lives for it in this age unless we were promised life in an eternal age. We can enter the kingdom only through faith, repentance and grace, so those are part of any message about God's kingdom. Salvation is a present-tense reality as well as a promise of future blessings. Acts 28:23, 29, 31 tells us that Paul preached not only the kingdom but also about Jesus and salvation. These are different ways to describe the same Christian message. One focuses on the result; one on the means by which we get that result.

In Corinth, Paul preached nothing but Christ and his crucifixion (1 Corinthians 2:2). In Acts 28:23, 29, 31, Luke tells us that Paul in Rome preached both the kingdom and about Jesus and salvation. These are different aspects of the same Christian message.

The kingdom is relevant not merely because it is our future reward, but also because it affects how we live and think in this age. We prepare for the future kingdom by living *in* it now, following our King. We are bringing the future into the present. As we live in allegiance to Jesus, we recognize God's rule as a present reality in our own experience, and we continue to hope in faith for a future time when the kingdom will be filled to the full, when the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

Perspective from the future

Suppose for a moment that you could live forever – what sort of world would you want to live in? Would it be a world in which everyone is trying to lord it over others, in which leaders enrich themselves at others' expense, in which everyone is looking out for themselves even if it means stealing from other people? A world in which you always have to watch your back, a world in which you can never trust anybody else, but always had to use threat or force to get what you want? If that sort of world lasted forever, you could *never* relax or let your guard down – there would always be someone eager to use an opportunity to take something you had. That's not much like heaven, if you ask me.

Or would you rather live in a world in which everyone was trying to be helpful, a world in which people who have power always use it to help others? That would be far better, I think, and that is the sort of kingdom that Jesus is offering us, because it is the sort of king that he is. The Lord's Prayer says that we want God's will to be done – we *want* that because it's the better way to live – and it's better *now*, not just later.

If we want a life of perpetual competition, of struggle against one another, then we don't have to do anything; that's the world we already have. But if

we want a world of cooperation, of kindness and love, *if we really want that*, then that is the way we ought to want to live right now. In one sense, we vote for our kingdom by the way we live. We choose each day what kind of world we want to live in. We can choose to live by the methods of *this* world, or by the methods of Jesus.

The way of Jesus is not *easy*, but then neither is competition and dog-eat-dog. The way of Jesus might be *difficult*, and it might sometimes involve pain and suffering for us, just as it did for Jesus. It might even involve *death* – but all of us are going to die anyway, aren't we? The way of Jesus comes with the good news that we will live again – we will have eternal life in the age of cooperation, kindness, and love, and there will be no more pain and no more sorrow.

The good news is that such a world will come, and right behavior and right ways of thinking will prevail, and Jesus has already qualified us to be in that kingdom of kindness. But the best part of eternity is not the low crime rate—it is the presence of God. We will live with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and with each other, in peace and love and joy.

We are not fully there yet, but that's what Jesus has given us, and he is saying that if that's the kind of life we want forever and ever, then that's the way we ought to be living right now. We are already in that kingdom, and we should live like it. If we really want it, we will be willing to live it. We have something wonderful to look forward to, and we have something wonderful to live for *even now*.

This is not easy. In fact, it's not possible. We *cannot* do it, because we are too weak to do it. Even with God's help, we keep falling short. The good news is that Jesus has *done this for us*, and he is willing to give it to us as a gift. We do not deserve to live in the kingdom of kindness, but Christ gives it to us as a gift. We are saved by God's *mercy*, not by anything we can do. No matter how many good things we do, we can't *buy* our way into an eternal life of joy.

But the good news is that Jesus has paid the price – a *big enough* price for all of us put together. He has already done it, and he is giving it to us. If we know that we will live forever in peace and joy and love, we can give our life for what Jesus wants, knowing that he will give us far more in return. If we really want life in a world of kindness and joy, if we really want it, then *we will want to live that way even now*, and Jesus will do it in us, because he has already done it, and he lives *in* us and makes new people out of us, if we *let* him.

Does this involve works – behaviors that we do? Yes. Do those works save us? No. They always fall *short* of what we really want. The Bible makes

it clear that we always need grace. But the Bible has a lot to say about behavior, too, and if we are to make sense of this dual emphasis, we need to understand how the two fit together.

If the gospel offers nothing more than forgiveness of sins, for example, then all its behavioral exhortations are verbal clutter that we could eliminate (and some people are happy to do that). But the problem with sin is not just that God has declared transgressors to be guilty and disqualified. God is not in the business of creating arbitrary rules that disqualify us, just so he can send Jesus to qualify us.

The problem with sin (indeed, the reason that God tells us to avoid it in the first place) is that it messes up our relationships and messes up our happiness. Paul describes sin as a power over us, a power we need to be freed from. Just removing the eternal penalty is only one aspect of the salvation we need – we also need to be delivered from the grip of sin itself. Taking the end-time punishment away is only one part of Christ's saving work.

To be saved from the pain-producing force of sin itself, we need something internal, affecting the nature of who we are as human beings, and changing the choices we make in life. We need to stop kicking the thorns, or banging our head against the wall, shooting ourselves in the foot, or whatever other metaphor you want to use for self-inflicted pain. A judicial declaration about the future judgment does not change our tendency to sin, and does not change the fact that sin causes pain in our lives and it is a power we need to be rescued from.

As long as we struggle with sin, as long as we do things that we wish we hadn't done, our salvation is not complete. Our future may be *guaranteed*, but our salvation is not yet complete. We look forward to a future transformation that will liberate us from the sin nature that resides within us. Another way of saying it is that we are on the right flight, but we are not yet at our final destination.

Behavior and grace are tied together because (quite apart from any eternal penalty) our behavior is something we need to be saved from. God wants us to participate in the triune life, a life that is freed from even the temptation to lie, cheat, steal, and commit adultery. It would make no sense for him to say, "I invite you into a community in which love and loyalty prevail – but that's just the future. In this age, it really doesn't matter whether you participate in that way of life or not."

If eternal life is worth having, it's worth living that way right now. The future kingdom – the life of the triune God – is brought into the present as we choose to live the way of the future – or rather, let Christ live it in us. This

is letting his kingdom be manifest in our lives. When Jesus is telling us to do something (preach the gospel, for example), he is saying that this reflects the mindset and way of life that is characteristic of the life to which he is inviting us, the life for which he has qualified us, so it is something that we ought to want to do. And when he tells us to avoid something, it is because that way of thinking or acting will not be in the eternal kingdom. It is something we need to be rescued from.

Our thoughts and emotions are an intrinsic part of the reward that Christ gives us. God says, “I want you to enjoy the results of love rather than selfishness.” But we do not enjoy the results of love if we remain selfish. Christ does not magically give us the results of having good relationships with other people unless we actually *have* good relationships. He does not give us the rewards of loving other people unless we actually love others. If there is no connection between rule and result, then the result is arbitrary – but God’s definition of sin is not arbitrary. He is saying that there is an intrinsic and unavoidable relationship between what we do, and how happy we are.

The reward is an intrinsic and inseparable part of behavioral changes that come with coming under the rule of the triune God. We are invited into a life of divine love, not a life of perpetually chasing after selfish pleasures. The many commands we see in the New Testament show us that certain behaviors are contrary to the kingdom of God, contrary to the lifestyle that God wants us to participate in, contrary to the lifestyle of the kingdom past and kingdom future.

We fail to live up to all that God calls us to be. But that does not mean that it’s pointless to try. We were made to share in the life of the triune God, and the better we are in tune with the way we’ve been made, the happier we will be.

In summary, sin has consequences in this age and in the next. Jesus has taken care of the ultimate penalty, but he does not change the fact that sin causes pain in our lives. Adultery, theft, and deceit have unpleasant results in this age. He does not magically change the results – he helps us avoid the negative consequences by working in us to change 1) the behavior and 2) the desires that lead to bad behavior and bad results. He helps us stop beating our head against the wall. This transformation doesn’t happen instantly, so we always need to trust in the grace he has promised. We are assured that he helps us in the present age as well as the future judgment.

Good behavior, and right ways of thinking, have consequences in this age and in the next. Eternal life with the triune God will be good primarily because of the relationships of love that will be in eternity – honesty and

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kindness will prevail. That sort of behavior has good results – not just in the future, but in the present age as well. So God invites us into this way of life. The kingdom is not just a future reality – people are even now entering God’s kingdom by responding to what he offers. He offers not an artificial world in which our enjoyment has no connection with the way we treat other people, but a world or kingdom in which joy is the natural result of love, of treating others the way we wish to be treated.

MATTHEW 13: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

We need to make sure that our description of the kingdom is compatible with the description Jesus gave. Jesus often preached about the kingdom of God—but what did he say about it? Did he describe peace and prosperity, health and wealth, law and order? Did he get into details of governmental organization?

No, we do not need to know those things. The most important thing we need to know about the kingdom is how we get there in the first place—and when Jesus described the kingdom, that is what he talked about.

Let's begin with Matthew 13, the largest collection of kingdom parables. Several times Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is like..." and then he would tell a story. We know many of these parables, but a few details may surprise us.

Parable of the sower

A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. (Matthew 13:3-9)

The story is easy to understand. We can picture a man scattering wheat seeds, and we understand about birds, thorns and sunshine. But Jesus had a spiritual purpose in this story, and the disciples found it puzzling. So they asked Jesus, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" (v. 10).

Jesus told them that it was not yet time for people to understand the "secrets of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 11). He is saying that this parable is actually about the kingdom of God—something we see again in verse 19. Most of the people in the crowd were not spiritually responsive (vs. 13-15), and so Jesus was not giving them more than they could handle. But Jesus taught his disciples the spiritual significance of the story—and they have published it for us.

When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not

understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. (v. 19)

When we preach the gospel, Jesus says, some people do not understand it. That's just the way it is in this world. Don't get upset if people think you are talking nonsense.

The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. (vs. 20-21)

Some people like the gospel as a novelty. But then they get bored with it, and when it doesn't solve their problems, they quit. So when we share the gospel, some of the people who respond will eventually fall away. Don't be surprised; that's just the way some people are.

The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. (v. 22)

People do not have to be rich to be deceived by riches. All sorts of people can be distracted by the worries of this world, and some drop out for that reason. They are more worried about this world than they are about eternity.

But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. (v. 23)

Jesus wants us to be this kind of person. Seeds don't have a choice as to what kind of soil they fall on, but we have a choice as to what kind of soil we will be for the seed. We can choose to respond to the gospel. When trials come, we can choose to stick with the gospel, or to fall away. When life gets boring or worrisome, we can choose whether to bear fruit for the kingdom. That's the kind of message Jesus gives us.

Parable of the weeds

Jesus told them another parable:

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

²⁷ The owner's servants came to him and said, "Sir, didn't you sow

good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?”

²⁸ “An enemy did this,” he replied.

The servants asked him, “Do you want us to go and pull them up?”

²⁹ “No,” he answered, “because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.” (Matthew 13:24-30)

Jesus explains the parable for us in verses 37-43. The good seeds are the disciples, spread by Jesus throughout the world. The weeds are bad people, spread by the devil. The bad people are mixed in with the good, and this is what the kingdom of God is like. God allows this; it is part of his plan. Jesus is describing a world in which Satan is active—the age we live in today. The kingdom of God starts small, like seeds, and it is growing now, and God is waiting to see which plants will bear fruit. Don’t be too hasty, he tells his servants. Wait and see. There will be a harvest.

In farming, weeds can never produce grain. But when it comes to the gospel, fruitless folks can be changed. What looks like a weed one day may begin bearing fruit another day. It depends on each person’s choice, and the kingdom of God gives people time to choose. But this will not go on forever. There will come a judgment, and the weeds will be removed from the kingdom (v. 41). God lets good and bad grow together, but he doesn’t want the bad to stay bad. He wants them to change, and he will keep only the good. (How we become “good” is covered in other places.)

This parable, and the previous one, describes an age in which we have spiritual enemies. It does not describe the world after Jesus returns. Rather, it’s a time when enemies snatch away the message that was sown in people’s hearts, and cause weeds to grow among God’s people. The kingdom of God, as described in these parables, is not a utopia in which everything is perfect. It is a time of struggle, trials, worries and deceit—but it is also a time of growth that leads toward God’s harvest.

In these parables, the harvest is at “the end of the age.” The harvest is the time when God’s people will be resurrected to be with the Lord forever. These descriptions of the kingdom *end* with the return of Christ, rather than beginning with it. These parables describe a kingdom that exists in this age, a kingdom that will also include a future judgment.

When Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom of God, this is the way he described it. He was not preaching about a golden age of peace and prosperity, but a long period of growth in which his disciples are to produce

fruit for the kingdom.

Parables of growth

The next story is about growth:

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. ³²Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.” (vs. 31-32)

Here Jesus described the kingdom not just as a seed, but as the *smallest* seed. Jesus is not describing a kingdom that arrives in a blaze of glory—he is describing a kingdom that begins very small. This is not what the Jews expected, but this is the kingdom that Jesus said was near. The kingdom is a story about gradual growth.

In the next parable, perhaps the shortest parable of all, Jesus compares the kingdom to a small amount of yeast.

Again he asked, “What shall I compare the kingdom of God to?

²¹ It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough. (Matthew 13:33)

When yeast is first mixed into bread dough, it is not very noticeable, but a small amount eventually produces a large result. The kingdom begins small and inconspicuous, but it grows large. In the parable of the wheat, it also produces a crop for harvest.

The small beginning of the kingdom would have surprised Jesus’ listeners. They were hoping that a Messiah would lead the Jewish people to a great victory over the Romans. They were hoping to become an independent nation, with the power of David’s kingdom and the wealth of Solomon’s. But Jesus was announcing that the kingdom must begin in a very small way.

These parables do not describe a future golden age. They do not fit well with a kingdom that begins in a blaze of glory at Jesus’ return. Rather, these parables describe the kingdom of God that exists for many years before the return of Christ. These parables describe a long, slow growth process for the kingdom.

The kingdom of God is not just a seed, and it is not just a fully grown plant. It is the entire story—something small that grows into something large.

Hidden treasures

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a

man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

⁴⁵ Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. (vs. 44-46)

Again, the story begins with the kingdom small and hidden—but it does not remain hidden. The traditional interpretation of these parables is that when we hear the message of the kingdom, we should be so full of joy that we are willing to give up everything else. That is true.

But we can never “buy” the kingdom or earn our salvation. Rather, in these parables (like other parables in this chapter), it may be that *Jesus* is the main character. He is the one who sees hidden treasure in his people (the field), and gives everything he has to purchase the prize. The value may not be evident right now, but it is there.

Good fish, bad fish

Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸ When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹ This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (vs. 47-50)

The kingdom of God captures both good and bad people. The message is given to both. They live together and are given a chance to change and grow. Eventually the time comes when judgment is made, and God keeps the good. He loves the bad, he seeks the bad, he wants the bad, but he does not want them to stay bad. But some people choose to stay bad. God gives each person time, but eventually there is a judgment. That is what the kingdom of God is like.

Again, these parables *end* with the day of judgment. When Jesus described the kingdom, he did not describe the world after his return. Rather, he described the world in this age, the age in which we hear the gospel, choose to respond, and choose to be faithful.

When we hear the gospel, we should respond. Though trials come our way, we need to keep our eyes on the goal. Though this life has its worries, we should not let them distract us. Through faith, we enter the kingdom of God, and through faithfulness, we stay in the kingdom of God, and through

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faith, we bear fruit for the kingdom.

MORE PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

Matthew 13 is the largest collection of parables that are specifically said to be about the kingdom of God. But Matthew has five additional parables describing the kingdom of God, and Mark has another. A brief analysis of these parables will show that Jesus did not describe the kingdom as an ideal age after his return. Rather, he described the kingdom as an age leading up to the final judgment.

The growing seed

This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come. (Mark 4:26-29)

This parable, like the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of yeast in the dough, is a story of growth. The kingdom of God is not just a seed, not just a harvest—it involves the whole story of growth—a growth that occurs whether or not humans notice it or understand the way it works. The gospel produces its fruit in people's lives, and then comes the harvest—the judgment.

The unmerciful servant

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶ At this the servant fell on his knees before him. “Be patient with me,” he begged, “and I will pay back everything.” ²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. “Pay back what you owe me!” he demanded.

²⁹ His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, “Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.”

³⁰ But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown

into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² Then the master called the servant in. “You wicked servant,” he said, “I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart. (Matthew 18:23-35)

This entire story is what the kingdom is like, Jesus said. It’s about judgment, and about the King forgiving our debts, and about our need to forgive one another. And it is also about severe consequences for those who don’t.

The kingdom of God involves a time in which people are forgiven, and are likewise expected to be forgiving toward one another. The amount we owe God, so to speak, is thousands of times greater than whatever anyone might owe to us. Since he has been merciful toward us, we are to be merciful to others.

Some of the detail is exaggeration. God does not torture people in an effort to make them repay what they owe. No amount of suffering could possibly pay off our transgressions against God. This detail is a rhetorical device, used to emphasize the importance of responding to God’s grace; it is not a commentary on the purpose of hell.

We do not forgive others as well as God forgives us. We always fall short in that—but this is not the unforgiveable sin. God forgives us of this failure, too. However, whenever we fail to forgive others, it shows that we have failed to appreciate how much God has forgiven us, and that we are still striving, at least in part, to earn something that has already been given to us. We live in a self-imposed torture of feeling that God is angry at us, when he really is not. We will not *experience* the forgiveness of God unless we are forgiving toward others.

The main point for us right now is that this parable describes life in this age, not our situation after Christ’s return.

The vineyard workers

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³ About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴ He told them, “You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.” ⁵ So they went.

He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶ About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, “Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?”

⁷ “Because no one has hired us,” they answered.

He said to them, “You also go and work in my vineyard.”

⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, “Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.”

⁹ The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰ So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹² “These who were hired last worked only one hour,” they said, “and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.”

¹³ But he answered one of them, “I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?” ¹⁴ Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵ Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last. (Matthew 20:1-16)

The kingdom of heaven is an age in which we work before we are rewarded. Some work much, and others work only a little, but all are paid. This does not mean that we earn our salvation, of course; work simply provides the setting of the parable. The point is that God is generous, and he is so generous that it troubles some people.

If Jesus were describing the world after his return, the parable would not be very relevant to his audience, nor to us. The work he describes as part of the kingdom is the work we are doing now, in this age, and the grace that some people complain about is grace that can be seen in this age. Some people work long and hard to do God’s will, and others work less, but in one respect the Master treats them all the same: He forgives them, whether their debt is large or small.

This parable presents us with two questions: 1) Do we think that God is too liberal? 2) Are we willing to do our best, even if it's difficult, even if others get the same reward for doing less?

The wedding clothes

The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

⁴Then he sent some more servants and said, "Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet."

⁵But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. ⁶The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

⁸Then he said to his servants, "The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. ⁹So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find." ¹⁰So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ¹²He asked, "How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?" The man was speechless.

¹³Then the king told the attendants, "Tie his hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

¹⁴For many are invited, but few are chosen. (Matthew 22:2-14)

Here, Jesus compared the kingdom to a wedding feast—not the banquet itself, but to the invitations. Jesus is not talking about what it will be like after we get there, but rather how we get there in the first place. The original invitees are the unbelieving Jews, but they ignored the message and persecuted the messengers.

God then invites everyone else, both good and bad, and that includes us. But God does not want bad people to stay bad. Eventually a day of judgment will come, when we will need to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ. The main point of the parable—what people need to know about the kingdom of God—is that the invitations are going out now, and we need to

respond to them.

The wise and foolish virgins

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. ²Five of them were foolish and five were wise. ³The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. ⁴The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. ⁵The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

⁶At midnight the cry rang out: “Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!”

⁷Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. ⁸The foolish ones said to the wise, “Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.”

⁹“No,” they replied, “there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.”

¹⁰But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

¹¹Later the others also came. “Lord, Lord,” they said, “open the door for us!”

¹²But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.”

¹³Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour. (Matthew 25:1-13)

Jesus is talking about the day that the master will return (Matthew 24:50), and he is saying that the kingdom will then be like a wedding for which some people will be unprepared. Not everyone who wants to attend will be permitted to.

Jesus’ point is not to make a prediction, but to encourage his disciples to be wise, to be prepared, to be always ready. The parable about the future is really an exhortation for today. Jesus does not say here what the oil represents, or how we “buy” more, or how we can be prepared. The point is simply that we need to be prepared.

The bags of gold

The traditional name of this next story is the parable of talents, from the Greek word *talanton*. Anciently, this was a large amount of money; the NIV has attempted to give the approximate value by translating it as “bags of gold.” The precise dollar figure is not important; it represents everything that

God has given to us. Some people get more than others, but God wants us to use whatever amount we have.

Again, it [the kingdom of God, v. 1] will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. ¹⁵To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. ¹⁶The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. ¹⁷So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. ¹⁸But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

¹⁹After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more."

²¹His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

²²The man with two bags of gold also came. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more."

²³His master replied, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

²⁴Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. "Master," he said, "I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you."

²⁶His master replied, "You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

²⁸"So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. ²⁹For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ³⁰And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

(Matthew 25:14-30)

Just as the good seeds produce grain for the harvest, here the good servants work for their master. There is a long time period, and the people are expected to do something, and to have some results. Those who fail to respond to the King will not be rewarded, and will miss out on the blessings of the kingdom.

The King determines how much to reward each person. He is the one who determines when to call each worker, and he determines when he will return for judgment. When Christ returns, the kingdom of God will be like the return of a wealthy landowner. Faithful servants will be rewarded; fearful and lazy servants will be excluded from the blessings.

The focus is more on the present than it is on the future. Jesus told the parable because it is relevant to the way we live now. Some will work hard and bear much fruit; others will bear less fruit, but both will be rewarded generously, and both will share in the master's happiness.

Jesus wants the gospel to have results in our lives. He does not want us to think that he is hard, or that he makes unreasonable demands. We do not need to be afraid, or to use that as an excuse for doing nothing. Rather, we are to grow—at least a little, hopefully more. Jesus wants us to be about our Father's business. He doesn't always spell out exactly what we are to do, but he wants us to at least make an effort, to try while we can.

Conclusion

We have now looked at all the parables that Jesus specifically said described the kingdom. Let's try to summarize what he said.

First, the kingdom of God begins in a small way. It is not conspicuous. Many people will not notice it. Others will hear about it and want to be part of it, but will fall away for one reason or another. The kingdom has too much work, too many trials. It is not the utopia that some people want it to be, and some people prefer the things of this world. But others treasure it so much that they are willing to give up everything for it.

The kingdom begins with God. He is the one who sows the seed; he is the one who hires the workers and gives the talents. He is the one who seeks a harvest, who sets the standards, who makes the judgments, who gives both grace and duties. He tells us to forgive others and to work for the kingdom.

When Jesus used parables to describe the kingdom, he did not describe a wonderful world that comes only after the King returns. Rather, he described a time of trials, choices and growth, and then a judgment when the King returns. Jesus does not describe what the kingdom looks like after that. God's

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kingdom includes both positive consequences and negative consequences. Jesus described our own age as a time of invitation, testing and growth.

The kingdom of God is now in a stage of growth, in which we are given grace, and given opportunity to bear fruit. We are expected to be forgiving, to be working, and to be ready. For the time will come when the kingdom will be like a harvest, when accounts will be paid, and decisions will be made as to who enjoys the celebration.

PREACHING IN THE EARLY CHURCH

What is the true gospel, the gospel revealed in the Bible? There are several ways to approach Scripture to learn what the gospel is.

One would be to focus on the teachings of Jesus, who often called his own message “the gospel of the kingdom of God.” We could see how he described the kingdom of God in his parables and in his other teachings. We have done this in previous studies.

But this is only part of the biblical picture. We should also remember that Jesus told his disciples some things privately, and told them not to tell the public until after his crucifixion and resurrection. So perhaps the gospel was more clearly revealed after the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles for their mission. Because of this possibility, we should also find out what Jesus’ *disciples* actually taught.

In this study, we will focus on the book of Acts. We will compare the apostolic gospel with the message of Jesus to see if they are the same.

1. When Matthew wrote his book about the life and ministry of Jesus, he was inspired to end the book with some final instructions—the last words of Jesus that the readers needed. What did Jesus tell his disciples to do? Matthew 28:19-20:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Luke also tells us what Jesus expected his apostles to preach. How did he describe it? Luke 24:46-47:

This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

Jesus’ commission to his church can be phrased in several ways. It can be called the gospel of the kingdom of God, but none of the commission verses happens to use that particular phrase. The content of the message is much more important than the label we use for it.

The content of the message is repentance and forgiveness of sins, which will be preached in Jesus’ name, that is, by his authority, continuing the ministry he began. People who believe are to be baptized and taught, and they will be saved. It’s a message of repentance, salvation and teaching.

It is a self-replicating message and mission, since one of the commands that Jesus' disciples are to teach is the command to go and make more disciples. It is to be taught and retaught to every generation.

2. The book of Acts reports Jesus' last-minute instructions to his followers. What did he say? Acts 1:8:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Jesus gave his apostles the task of being his witnesses. Throughout the book, Luke shows that the apostles were witnesses of Jesus in Jerusalem, Samaria and all the way to Rome.

The word "witness" is important in the book of Acts. "Witness" is a courtroom term. In a trial, witnesses are called to tell what they have seen and heard. Similarly, the apostles preached what they had seen and heard of Jesus. They were his witnesses, testifying to the truth about him.

The Greek word for "testify" is *martyreo*, and the word for "witness" is similar: *martyr*. We get the English word "martyr" from the fact that many people who were witnesses for Jesus were killed because of their faith. Their willingness to die for Jesus was a powerful testimony that they firmly believed that salvation was given only through him. They were his witnesses to the very end.

3. Luke includes numerous sermons in Acts, the "history of the early church." What was Peter inspired to preach about on the Day of Pentecost? Acts 2:14-36.

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.
¹⁵These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning!
¹⁶No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷"In the last days, God says,

I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

¹⁹I will show wonders in the heavens above

and signs on the earth below,
blood and fire and billows of smoke.

²⁰The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood
before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

²¹And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved.’

²²“Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. ²⁵David said about him:

“I saw the Lord always before me.
Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.

²⁶Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest in hope,

²⁷because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,
you will not let your holy one see decay.

²⁸You have made known to me the paths of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence.’

²⁹“Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. ³⁰But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. ³²God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. ³³Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. ³⁴For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

“The Lord said to my Lord:

“Sit at my right hand

³⁵until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.”’

³⁶“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this

Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

Peter began by explaining the miracle of tongues. What was his focus after that? See verse 22 above. What was his main point? See verse 36. What were the people supposed to do with this information—what difference was it to make in their lives? Verse 38:

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

4. Peter gave another sermon in chapter 3. Again, he began by explaining a miracle (verse 12). What then did he preach about? Verses 13-18.

¹²When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? ¹³The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. ¹⁴You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. ¹⁵You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. ¹⁶By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

¹⁷“Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. ¹⁸But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer.

What were the people encouraged to do? Verse 19.

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.

The focus of these sermons is Jesus. Peter said that Jesus would return and restore everything, but the focus of his message was not on the future. Rather, he focused on what Jesus had already done, and how people were to respond to that right now.

Peter talked about Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, his fulfillment of Scripture, and his identity as Lord and Christ. Peter called for repentance and baptism, and he offered the Holy Spirit and forgiveness. That was his concluding exhortation, the main point he wanted people to get.

5. The next sermon in Acts is a long message by Stephen, who preached

to the Jewish court. He began with an overview of history (Acts 7:1-50). What accusation did Stephen then make against the Jewish leaders? Verses 51-52.

⁵¹“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵²Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him.

This made them angry. What then did Stephen testify before the court? Verse 56:

“Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

Stephen’s witness made the Sanhedrin so angry that they cut his sermon short and stoned him to death. His witness to Jesus made him a martyr. We do not know for sure how he would have concluded his speech/sermon, but as it turns out, his dying words were a message about forgiveness through Jesus (verse 60):

Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

6. The next sermon that Luke reports is the sermon Peter gave in the house of Cornelius. This is a short sermon, perhaps because Cornelius already knew much of the message (Acts 10:36-37). But Peter repeated the most important parts. What was the focus? Verses 38-41.

³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached— ³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

³⁹ “We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴² He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

How did Peter summarize the commission Jesus had given the apostles? Verse 42. How did he conclude? Verse 43.

7. Luke then gives us some sermons by the apostle Paul, who spoke to four different audiences: Jews in Pisidia, Gentiles in Athens, Jews in Jerusalem, and civil rulers. Although Paul used different approaches for these audiences, some aspects of the message remained the same. In the synagogue in Pisidia, Paul began with Israel's history (Acts 13:16-22). What did he concentrate on for most of the sermon? Verses 23-37. What was the conclusion, the main point? Verses 38-39.

²³“From this man’s descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised. ²⁴Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. ²⁵As John was completing his work, he said: ‘Who do you suppose I am? I am not the one you are looking for. But there is one coming after me whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.’

²⁶“Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. ²⁷The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. ²⁸Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. ²⁹When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the cross and laid him in a tomb. ³⁰But God raised him from the dead, ³¹and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

³²“We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors ³³he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:

“You are my son;
today I have become your father.’

³⁴God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said,

“I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.’

³⁵So it is also stated elsewhere:

“You will not let your holy one see decay.’

³⁶“Now when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed. ³⁷But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

³⁸“Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. ³⁹Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses.

8. In Athens, Paul faced a different crowd. He could not begin with Scripture or Jewish history. But he could start with a contemporary situation (Acts 17:22-23) and introduce them to the Creator God (verses 24-28). What did Paul exhort the people to do? Verse 30. How did Paul end his message? Verse 31.

³⁰In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

9. In front of a Jerusalem crowd, Paul gave a more personal history—his own history before conversion, then his conversion and his commission. How did Ananias describe Paul’s mission? Acts 22:15.

You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard.

10. In front of King Agrippa, Paul again gave his personal testimony. As Paul describes it, what did Jesus tell him to preach? Acts 26:16-18.

‘Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. ¹⁷I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.’

How did he describe his own preaching? Verse 20. How did he summarize his own message? Verse 23.

²⁰First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. ²¹That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. ²²But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen — ²³that the Messiah would

suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.

Keeping in mind that some of the sermons were not finished, let us see what they have in common:

- All of them mention God.
- All of them mention Jesus.
- Seven of them mention Jesus' death.
- Seven mention his resurrection.
- Four say that he is now exalted.
- Seven mention forgiveness of sins.
- Five mention repentance.
- Three mention the need for faith.
- Five of them mention Scripture.
- None of them use the word "kingdom."

Luke tells us that the early church preached the gospel of the kingdom of God, but from the examples he gives us, we see that it is not necessary to use the word kingdom when we preach the gospel. And we do not need to describe a future age.

The gospel is good news right now, but it is good only if we are able to participate in it—and we do that through Jesus Christ. He is the one we need to hear about, since he is the one who makes it possible.

The book of Acts shows us that gospel preaching should focus on Jesus Christ, especially his death and resurrection, and on repentance, forgiveness and salvation through him.

For further reading

For further study about the gospel, you may want to consult one of these titles:

- Green, Michael. *Evangelism in the Early Church*. Eerdmans, 1970; Harold Shaw, 1995.
- George Eldon Ladd. "Kingdom of Christ, God, Heaven," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter Elwell (Baker, 1984). Ladd also wrote *Gospel of the Kingdom* (Eerdmans, 1959), and there are several relevant chapters in his *Theology of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1993).
- Harry Poe. *The Gospel and Its Meaning: A Theology for Evangelism and Church Growth*. Zondervan, 1996.

- Robert H. Stein. “Kingdom of God,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, edited by Walter Elwell (Baker, 1996). Stein also wrote *The Method and Message of Jesus’ Teaching* (Westminster/John Knox, 1995).

ALREADY IN THE KINGDOM: A STUDY OF COLOSSIANS 1

Colosse was a small city in Asia Minor, not important for much of anything — it is known to us chiefly because the apostle Paul wrote a letter to the believers who lived there. The church was started by Epaphras, who had learned about Christ from Paul, so even though Paul hadn't started the church, he felt a sense of responsibility for its health and growth.

Strange ideas were circulating in Colossae. False teachers were saying that knowing about Jesus was a good beginning, but that believers needed deeper wisdom and some new ascetic practices in order to reach their true potential. Epaphras had tried to set them straight, but Paul thought it would be helpful for him to assure the Colossians that the gospel they heard from Epaphras was indeed the complete gospel.

Address information (verses 1-2)

The letter begins by saying who wrote it: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.” Greek letters didn't normally name companions as co-authors, so it is likely that Timothy helped write this letter.

Next, the recipients are greeted: “To God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.” Paul believes that they are faithful; he does not seem to think that they are in serious danger of apostasy — they just need some reassurance.

Prayer of gratitude (verses 3-12)

Greek letters often began with a prayer or blessing; Paul modifies this custom to tell the Colossians what he prays about. He praises them indirectly, giving God the credit for their faith and love: “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people.”

Their growth comes from knowledge the gospel has given them: “The faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message, the gospel that has come to you.” By the word “hope,” Paul is referring to the *object* of our hope — a heavenly reward. Christian life, including faith toward God and love toward others, is given a foundation by knowing that God gives us eternal life.

Paul reminds them that they are part of a growing movement: “The gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace.” He assures them that they have heard *all* the truth — they do not need any supplements or add-ons to bring them to a higher level of spirituality.

“You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.” Since Paul could not go everywhere, he trained people like Epaphras to be part of a missionary team that carried the gospel into outlying areas. He brought back news to Paul that the people in Colosse were responding to the gospel.

After this, Paul resumes the description of his prayers for the people: “For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.” Paul did not wait for a crisis to pray for the people — as soon as he heard about their love, he started praying for their growth in wisdom. He did not need additional information — he wanted them to grow in their understanding of the message they had already received.

Why did he pray for this? Because he wanted to see their faith and love be evident in the way they lived: “so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way.” Paul then lists four ways in which believers might please God:

1. “Bearing fruit in every good work,
2. “growing in the knowledge of God,
3. “being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and
4. “giving joyful thanks to the Father.”

Paul wanted the believers to know God’s will so they would do good works, learn more about God, have strength to withstand difficulties, and remain thankful.

Already qualified (verses 13-14)

One reason to be thankful is that God has already “qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.” We could not qualify on our own, but God did it for us. How did he do that? “He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

Our sins would disqualify us from the kingdom of light, but God, in Jesus, has forgiven our sins, so we are now qualified. Just as God redeemed the Israelites out of Egypt and gave them land as an inheritance, he redeemed or rescued us from the dominion of darkness and sin, and has given us our inheritance.

Christ is supreme (verses 15-23)

In a poetic passage, Paul then describes how great Christ is: “The Son is the image of the invisible God...” He shows us what God is like — not in physical characteristics, but in spiritual attributes such as love and righteousness. He is also “...the firstborn over all creation.” This does not refer to a birth or any other beginning in time. Rather, “firstborn” refers to a pre-eminent status.

Christ has this superiority because he is the Creator: “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.” Christians do not need to appease government officials or spirit beings; we are already approved by Christ, the highest of all powers.

Paul summarizes: “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” He sustains all that he has created.

After recounting Christ’s role with creation, Paul describes his role in redemption, the new creation: “He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead [the first to be raised from the realm of the dead], so that in everything he might have the supremacy.”

Paul again mentions that Jesus is a complete representation of the Father, and a complete Savior: “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Jesus is fully divine], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

Earlier, Paul used the metaphor of redemption. Here, he describes salvation as reconciliation, making peace between enemies. God achieved this peace by sending Jesus, who was not only fully divine, but also fully human — someone who could represent all creation in his atoning death on the cross. The Creator became part of creation in order to rescue us from our own sinfulness. In him we died, and in him we are raised to new life — life with God.

“Once you were alienated from God, Paul says, and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.” Yes, our sins had separated us from

God. “But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death.”

Why? “To present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.” The debt has been paid, the sin has been erased; there can be no accusation for those who trust in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1, 33-34). When we appear before God, we are holy in Christ — fully qualified for his kingdom.

There is one requirement: “...if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel.” You are on the right boat, headed to the right destination. Don’t jump ship — this is the right ship. The ticket has been paid for, so you don’t need to work for it. Jesus has done all that needs to be done — he is the only one who could, and the only one who did.

“This is the gospel that you heard,” Paul assures the Colossians, “and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.” You have heard the real gospel, and you already know enough, Paul says — you do not need any secret, obscure information or any extra rituals. You are already in the kingdom of Christ. It’s good news!

Paul’s work for the church (verses 24-29)

After Paul mentions that he is a servant of the gospel, he reflects on the fact that his ministry is rewarded not with wealth, but with persecution. (Col. 4:2 indicates that he is writing from prison.) But he sees a positive role for his troubles: “Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.”

There was nothing lacking in Christ’s afflictions — what he did was fully sufficient for our salvation. What is lacking, from Paul’s perspective, is that Paul has not experienced nearly as many afflictions as his Lord did. So in his sufferings he is filling up this deficiency, and he is glad to do it, because he is suffering for serving Christ, for helping the church grow.

He serves Christ by working for his body, the church: “I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness.” Here Paul again mentions that the Colossians have the complete gospel. He describes the message as “the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord’s people.” It’s not a mystery anymore — it is revealed.

“God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, is doing his best to help everyone hear the message: Christ is in you, and he is our assurance of glory. In him we have forgiveness,

redemption, and reconciliation with God. By being joined to him, we are transferred into his kingdom, and there is laid up for us in heaven a great reward.

“He [Christ] is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.” There is no secret part of the message, or additional levels of initiation, as many Greek religions had. No, Paul is proclaiming the full gospel, enough to bring everyone to complete glory. Christ is all they need to know.

“To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me” (v. 29). Just as he gave God thanks for the faith and love of the Colossians, here he gives Christ credit for all the work that he is doing. Just as creation was done by, through, and for Christ, the new creation is being done by him, through him, and for him, too.

Things to think about

- How often do I pray that others might grow in wisdom and knowledge? (v. 9)
- Is it *possible* for people to live a life worthy of the Lord and do everything he wants? (v. 10)
- Do I *feel* like I am in the kingdom of Christ? (v. 13)
- Is Christ supreme in my life and thought? (v. 18)
- When I was alienated from God, did I *feel* alienated? (v. 21)
- What supplements do people try to put on the gospel today?
- Have I suffered in letting people in on the secret of Jesus? (v. 24)

UNDERSTANDING THE KINGDOM

By Joseph Tkach

Jesus told his disciples to pray, “your kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10). But what is that kingdom? And when and how will it come?

Noting the rather mysterious nature of the kingdom (Matthew 13:11), Jesus gave his disciples homespun illustrations to help them understand. He would say, “The kingdom is like . . .,” then offer analogies like a mustard seed that starts small, a man who finds hidden treasure in a field, a farmer who sows seed, or a merchant who sells his entire inventory to buy a pearl of great price.

Through such analogies, Jesus sought to help his disciples understand that the kingdom of God is “not of this world” (John 18:36). Yet, they continued to misunderstand, expecting Jesus to lead their occupied nation into a worldly kingdom that would give them political freedom, power and prestige.

Many of Jesus’ followers have continued to misunderstand. Some think that the kingdom is an event that pertains more to the future than to the present. Based on that wrong premise, they speak of a “soon-coming kingdom.” This mistaken understanding results from poor exegesis and confused interpretations of Scripture. Though they may not intentionally seek to diminish the triumph of Christ’s birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension, this misunderstanding of the kingdom of God does just that.

Like a three-stage rocket

Though no single illustration perfectly captures the full scope of the kingdom of God, one might be helpful in our modern context: *The kingdom of God is like a three-stage rocket*. The first two stages pertain to the present reality of the kingdom and the third to its future fullness.

Stage 1: Launch

The first stage was the “launch” of the kingdom into our world through the Word of God becoming flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Being fully God and fully human, Jesus brings the kingdom of God to us. As the King of kings, wherever Jesus is, the kingdom is present.

Stage 2: Present reality

The second stage began with what Jesus accomplished through his death, resurrection, ascension and the sending of the Spirit. Though he no longer dwells among us physically, Jesus dwells within us by the Spirit, knitting us together as one. The kingdom of God is now present—it has broken into all of creation. No matter which country is our earthly home, our citizenship is

in heaven, for we live now under the sovereign reign and rule (kingdom) of God.

Those who follow Jesus come under that reign and rule. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10), he was instructing them to pray concerning both the here and now as well as the future aspects of the kingdom. As followers of Jesus we are called to bear witness to our citizenship in a kingdom that already is present. We are not to think of the kingdom as only something in the future. As citizens of the kingdom here and now, we are about our Father’s business, doing his kingdom work now. That work includes caring for the poor and needy and faithfully stewarding God’s creation. Through such works of kingdom righteousness, we share in the ongoing mission of Jesus, demonstrating the character of his present kingdom rule and reign.

Stage 3: Future fullness

The third stage of the kingdom is yet future. It will occur when Jesus returns in glory to usher in a new heaven and new earth.

At that time, God will be known by all and will be seen to be who he truly is—“all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28). We have the sure hope that everything will then be put right. It is encouraging for us to dream and imagine what that will be like, although we remember Paul’s words that no mind is able to fully conceive of it (1 Corinthians 2:9).

As we dream of the kingdom’s third stage, let’s not forget the first two. Though having a future aspect, the kingdom is here now. Because that is so, we are called to live accordingly, to share with others the good news (gospel) of Jesus the King, and of his present and future reign in the kingdom of God.

YOUR INVITATION TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Everyone has some concept of right and wrong, and everyone has done something wrong even by his or her own definition. “To err is human,” says a common proverb. Everyone has betrayed a friend, broken a promise or hurt someone’s feelings. Everyone has experienced the feeling of guilt.

People therefore want God to stay away from them. They do not want a day of judgment, because they know they cannot stand before God with a clear conscience. They know they should obey him, and they also know that they have not. They are ashamed and guilty.

How can their guilt be erased? How can the conscience be cleared? “To forgive is divine,” the proverb concludes. God himself will forgive.

Many people know the proverb, but somehow do not believe that God is divine enough to forgive their sins. They still feel guilty. They still fear the appearance of God and the day of judgment.

However, God has already appeared — in the person of Jesus Christ. He did not come to condemn, but to save. He brought a message of forgiveness, and he died on a cross to guarantee that we may be forgiven. The message of Jesus, the message of the cross, is good news for all who feel their guilt. Jesus, the divine human, has died for us. Forgiveness is given freely to all.

We need this message of good news! Christ’s gospel brings peace of mind, happiness and personal victory.

The true gospel, the real good news, is the gospel Jesus preached. It’s the gospel the apostles preached: Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2), Jesus Christ in Christians, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27), the resurrection from the dead, the message of hope and salvation for humanity — this is the gospel of the kingdom of God!

God has given his church the commission to proclaim this message, and zeal of his Spirit to accomplish the task.

In 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, Paul described the gospel Jesus gave his church. Notice carefully his words:

Brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.
²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was

buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles,⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

What Paul calls “of first importance” is the fact that Jesus is the Messiah or Christ, that he died for our sins, was buried and was raised, all according to the Scriptures. Further, he highlights the fact that there were plenty of witnesses to Christ’s resurrection, lest any should doubt that Jesus was really raised from the dead.

“By this gospel you are saved,” Paul asserts. Our goal, like Paul’s, should be to pass on that which we have received, that which is “of first importance.” What we must pass on is exactly what Paul and the other apostles received — that which is of first importance — “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

All other biblical teaching hinges on these primary facts. Only the Son of God could die for our sins, and it is only because he died and was raised again from the dead that we can live in steadfast assurance of his return and of our inheritance of eternal life.

Therefore John could write:

⁹We accept human testimony, but God’s testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son.
¹⁰Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son.
¹¹And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5:9-12)

The gospel Jesus preached

Some people can get quite excited about Bible prophecy, it seems, but have a hard time getting excited about the central message of the Bible — salvation through Jesus Christ. God has given Christians the most precious gift possible and the role of telling others how they, too, can receive that gift.

In describing to the centurion Cornelius the apostles’ commission, Peter said: “He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the

prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:42-43).

This is the supreme message, the good news, which the apostles came to see was the central message of all the prophets — that Jesus Christ is the One appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead, and that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name!

Most central truth

Luke wrote that Jesus reminded his disciples of the central truth of his message just before he ascended:

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:45-48)

When Jesus opened the apostles’ minds so they could understand the Scriptures, what was it that he caused them to understand the Scriptures to contain? In other words, what is, according to Jesus, the central, most important truth to understand from the Old Testament Scriptures? It is that Christ would suffer and rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached in his name to all nations!

“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved,” Peter preached (Acts 4:12).

But what about the gospel of the kingdom of God? Didn’t Jesus preach the good news of the kingdom of God? Of course he did! Is the gospel of the kingdom of God different from the gospel Paul, Peter and John preached about salvation in Jesus Christ? Not at all!

Entrance into the kingdom of God is salvation. Being saved and entering the kingdom of God are the same thing! Receiving eternal life is the same thing as receiving salvation, because salvation is being saved from sin, which brings death.

In Jesus there is life — eternal life. Eternal life requires forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness of sin, or justification, comes only by faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is both Judge and Redeemer. And he is also King of that kingdom. The gospel of the kingdom of God is the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. Jesus and his apostles preached the same message — Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the one and only way to receive salvation, deliverance, eternal

life and entrance into the kingdom of God.

And when one's mind is opened to understand the Old Testament prophecies, as Jesus opened the apostles' minds (Luke 24:45), it becomes plain that the central message of the prophets, too, was Jesus Christ (Acts 10:43).

Let's go further. John wrote, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them" (John 3:36). That's plain language!

Jesus said: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). If there is anything we must understand from the Word of God, it is that a person cannot come to the Father, cannot know God, cannot inherit eternal life and cannot enter the kingdom of God, apart from Jesus Christ.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote:

Giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. ¹³ For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:12-14)

Notice how the inheritance of the saints, the kingdom of light, the kingdom of the Son, redemption and forgiveness of sins all coalesce together as one seamless garment of the word of truth that is the gospel.

In verse 4, Paul speaks of the Colossians' "faith in Christ Jesus" and "the love you have for all God's people." He describes that faith and love as springing "from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you" (verses 5-6). Again, the gospel is centered in the magnificent hope of eternal salvation in the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, by whom we have received redemption.

In verses 21-23, Paul continues:

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. ²² But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — ²³ if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

In verses 25-29, Paul continues to underscore the gospel to which he was commissioned and his goal in proclaiming it. He wrote:

I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— ²⁶ the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. ²⁷ To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

²⁸ He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. ²⁹ To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

What the gospel is all about

Jesus Christ is what the gospel is all about. It is about his identity and activity as the Son of God (John 3:18), as judge of the living and the dead (2 Timothy 4:1), as the Christ (Acts 17:3), as Savior (2 Timothy 1:10), as High Priest (Hebrews 4:14), as advocate (I John 2:1), as King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 17:14), as the firstborn among many siblings (Romans 8:29), as friend (John 15:14-15).

It is about him as Shepherd and Overseer of our souls (1 Peter 2:25), as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), as our Passover sacrificed for us (1 Corinthians 5:7), as the image of the invisible God and the firstborn over all creation (Colossians 1:15), as the head of the church and the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead (verse 18), as the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being (Hebrews 1:3), as the revealer of the Father (Matthew 11:27), as the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6), as the door (John 10:7).

The gospel is about Christ as the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), as the ruler of the creation of God (Revelation 3:14), the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (Revelation 22:13), as the Branch (Jeremiah 23:5), as the chief cornerstone (1 Peter 2:6), as the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24), as the desired of all nations (Haggai 2:7). It is about Christ the faithful and true witness (Revelation 3:14), the heir of all things (Hebrews 1:2), the light of the world (John 8:12), the living bread (John 6:51), the Root of Jesse (Isaiah 11:10), our salvation (Luke 2:30), the sun of righteousness (Malachi 4:2), the Word of life (1 John 1:1), declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4).

Paul wrote, “No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11). Jesus Christ is the heart and core, the central theme, the foundation of the gospel.

One cannot preach anything else and be consistent with the Bible. Jesus told the leaders of the Jews: “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” (John 5:39-40).

Message of salvation

The message Christians are called to proclaim is about salvation, which is eternal life in the kingdom of God. To receive that eternal salvation, to enter the kingdom of God, one must come through the only true Door, the only true Way — Jesus Christ. He is the King of the kingdom.

John wrote, “No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:23). Paul wrote to Timothy, “There is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time” (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

We are warned in Hebrews 2:3: “How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.” The message of salvation was first announced by Jesus himself — it was Jesus’ own message from the Father.

John wrote of God’s own testimony about his Son: “This is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:11-12).

John again showed the emphasis on the Son in John 5:22-23: “The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.”

That is why the church is to preach about Jesus Christ! Isaiah prophesied,

This is what the Sovereign Lord says:
“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;
the one who relies on it
will never be stricken with panic. (Isaiah 28:16)

Walking in the new life to which we as Christians are called in Jesus Christ, trusting in him as our sure foundation and eagerly looking forward to his

second coming, we can rejoice in the hope and assurance of our eternal inheritance.

A CALL TO LIVE THE FUTURE HERE AND NOW

“After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’” (Mark 1:14-15).

This good news Jesus Christ brought is known as the gospel. It is a potent, life-changing and life-transforming message. The gospel not only convicts and converts, it will eventually confound all who stand against it.

The gospel is “the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). The gospel is our invitation from God to live on an altogether different plane. It is good news of a future inheritance to be bestowed in full when Christ returns. But it is also an invitation to an invigorating spiritual reality that can be ours here and now.

Paul describes the gospel as “the gospel of Christ” (1 Corinthians 9:12), “the gospel of God” (Romans 15:16), “the gospel of peace” (Ephesians 6:15). Paul took his cue from Jesus and began to redefine the Jewish view of the kingdom of God around the universal significance of Christ’s first appearing.

As the *New Dictionary of Theology* explains, in the writings of Paul, “the preacher [Christ] becomes the preached one” (page 278). The Jesus who walked the dusty roads of Judea and Galilee, Paul taught, is now the resurrected Christ who sits at the right hand of God, and who is “the head over every power and authority” (Colossians 2:10).

In the gospel according to Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were “of first importance,” the key events in God’s plan (1 Corinthians 15:1-11). The gospel was good news for the poor and downtrodden. History was going somewhere. Right, not might, would ultimately triumph. The pierced hand had triumphed over the iron fist. The kingdom of evil was being replaced by the reign of Jesus Christ, an order of things that Christians already experienced in part.

Paul stressed this aspect of the gospel to the Colossians:

Giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. ¹³ For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:12-14)

For beleaguered Christians in all ages, the gospel is both a present reality and a future hope. The resurrected Christ, who presides over time, space and

everything that happens here below, is the Christian's champion. The One who ascended into the heavenly realms is the ever-present source of power (Ephesians 3:20-21).

The good news is that Jesus Christ triumphed over every obstacle during his earthly life. The way of the cross is the rough but triumphant road into the kingdom of God. That is why Paul could sum up the gospel succinctly: "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

The great reversal

When Jesus appeared in Galilee earnestly preaching the gospel, he expected a response. He expects a response today. But Jesus' original invitation to enter the kingdom was not received in a vacuum. Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God, accompanied by impressive signs and wonders, electrified a nation chafing under the Roman Empire. This is one reason Jesus had to clarify what he meant by the kingdom of God.

The Jews in Jesus' day were looking for a strongman to restore their nation to the glory days of David and Solomon. But Jesus' message was "doubly revolutionary," in the words of British scholar N.T. Wright. For one thing, Jesus took the popular expectation of a Jewish superstate throwing off the Roman yoke, and transformed it. He turned the widespread hope of political salvation into a message of spiritual deliverance: the gospel!

"The kingdom of God is here, he seemed to be saying, *but it's not like you thought it was going to be*" (Wright, *Who Was Jesus?*, page 98).

Jesus shocked people with what his good news implied. "Many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first," Jesus emphasized (Matthew 19:30).

"There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth," he told his own people, the Jews, "when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out" (Luke 13:28). The great banquet was for everyone (Luke 14:16-24). The Gentiles were invited to the kingdom, too.

And one thing more, something just as revolutionary. This prophet from Nazareth seemed to have a lot of time for the disenfranchised — from lepers and physically disadvantaged folk to money-grabbing tax collectors — and sometimes even the hated Roman oppressors.

The good news Jesus brought upset everyone's assumptions, even those of his own disciples (Luke 9:51-56). Jesus insisted that the kingdom they looked for as a future event was already dynamically present in his ministry.

As he said after one dramatic episode: “If I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20). Those who saw Jesus in action, in other words, were experiencing the presence of the future.

Jesus turned popular expectation on its head in at least three ways:

1. Jesus taught the good news that the kingdom comes as a pure gift — the reign of God bringing healing in its wake already. Thus, Jesus inaugurated “the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:19; Isaiah 61:1-2). But the people getting into the kingdom were the weary and the burdened, the poor and the beggars, repentant tax collectors and harlots, and children and social outcasts. To social outcasts and spiritually lost sheep, Jesus proclaimed himself their shepherd.
2. Jesus’ good news was also for those willing to turn to God through repentance. They would find God to be like a generous father who scans the horizon for his wandering sons and daughters and spots them “while...still a long way off” (Luke 15:20). The good news of the gospel meant that anyone saying the words, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13), and really meaning them, would find God a sympathetic listener. Always. “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9). To those who believed, this was the best news they could ever hear.
3. Jesus’ gospel also meant that, despite all appearances to the contrary, nothing could stop the triumph of the kingdom Jesus Christ had inaugurated. Though that kingdom would meet fierce and unrelenting resistance, it would ultimately triumph in supernatural power and splendor.

Christ told his disciples: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats” (Matthew 25:31-32).

Jesus’ gospel message had a dynamic tension between the “already” and the “not yet.” The gospel of the kingdom referred to a rule of God that was already active — “the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor” (Matthew 11:5).

But the kingdom was “not yet” in the sense that its full consummation still lay ahead. To understand the gospel is to appreciate this twofold aspect — the interval between the promised presence of the King who lives inside

his people now and his dramatic reappearance.

The gospel of your salvation

Paul the missionary helped initiate the second great movement of the gospel — its expansion from tiny Judea into the sophisticated Greco-Roman world of the middle first century of the present era. Paul, the repentant onetime persecutor of Christians, refocused the blazing light of the gospel through the prism of day-to-day living. He tapped into the practical implications of the gospel even as he exalted the glorified Christ.

In the face of fanatical resistance, Paul shared with his fellow Christians the breathtaking significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ:

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. ²² But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — ²³ if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. (Colossians 1:21-22)

Paul said, “This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant” (v. 23).

Reconciliation. Without blemish. Grace. Deliverance. Forgiveness. And not just in the future, but here and now. That was Paul's gospel. The resurrection, the climax to which the Synoptic Gospels and John pointed their readers (John 20:31), released the power within the gospel for daily Christian living.

Jesus Christ's resurrection certified the gospel. Therefore, taught Paul, those events in far-off Judea give all men and women hope: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed — a righteousness that is by faith from first to last” (Romans 1:16-17).

A personal gospel

John brought still another dimension to the gospel, presenting Jesus Christ as he was remembered by “the disciple whom he loved” (John 19:26), a man with the heart of a pastor, a church leader deeply concerned about people, their cares and fears. “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are

written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31).

John’s presentation of the gospel revolves around the thrilling phrase, “that by believing you may have life.” “The central theme of the Synoptics is the presence of the eschatological kingdom of God,” wrote Professor George Eldon Ladd. “John has almost nothing to say about this theme.... John’s central theme is eternal life as a present possession” (“Eschatology,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, page 136).

John brilliantly enshrines another aspect of the gospel Jesus Christ in some of his most personal, intimate and up-close moments. John’s Gospel is a vivid account of the personal ministering presence of the Messiah.

In John’s Gospel, we meet a Christ who was a powerful public preacher (John 7:37-46). We see Jesus as warm and hospitable. From his welcoming invitation, “Come...and you will see” (John 1:39), to the challenge to doubting Thomas to put his finger in the nail marks in his hands (John 20:27), here is an unforgettable portrait of the One who “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

People felt so welcome and comfortable with Jesus that they engaged him in lively give-and-take (John 6:5-8). They reclined next to him at a meal while eating out of the same dish with him (John 13:23-26). They loved him so dearly as to impulsively swim to shore at the very sight of him to enjoy an impromptu breakfast he had prepared with his own hands (John 21:7-14).

The Gospel of John reminds us of how much the good news revolves around Jesus Christ, the example he set and the eternal life available to us through him (John 10:10).

It reminds us that preaching the gospel isn’t enough. We have to live it as well. John offers encouragement: Others may be attracted by our example to share the good news of the kingdom. That is what happened to the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well (John 4:27-30) and to Mary of Magdala (John 20:10-18).

The One who wept at Lazarus’ grave, the humble servant who washed his disciples’ feet, is alive today. He offers us his own presence through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit: “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23).

Jesus actively leads his people today through the Holy Spirit. His invitation is as personal and as encouraging as ever: “Come...and you will see” (John 1:39).

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

A series by Gary W. Deddo

Part 1

Introduction

Down through the ages, the kingdom of God has been the focus of much Christian teaching, and rightly so. As a result, controversy has arisen, particularly in the 20th century. Consensus is hard to come by in large part due to the volume and complexity of the biblical material and the many theological themes that intersect at this topic. Also at work are wide differences of theological commitments and assumptions that scholars and pastors bring to the task and that then lead them to offer a wide range of conclusions.

For the purpose of growing our faith in understanding, let's review the central issues related to the kingdom of God. I'll be drawing on the scholarship and perspective of others who share the same basic historic orthodox Christian faith—a faith that is grounded in Scripture and interpreted with Jesus Christ at its center. He is the one who leads us in our worship of the Triune God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This incarnational and Trinitarian approach, while faithful, will not directly answer every question we might have concerning the kingdom of God. But it will provide a secure foundation and a reliable guide for pursuing a faithful understanding.

Over the past 100 years, there has been a growing consensus on central issues among those involved in biblical studies who share those fundamental theological convictions that align with our own. Those convictions involve the reality and reliability of biblical revelation, a sound approach to biblical interpretation and the basics of Christian understanding (doctrine) concerning such matters as the divinity of Christ, the triune nature of God, the centrality of the gracious work of God fulfilled in Christ through the Holy Spirit, and the redemptive working of God in and through history to bring it to its consummation—its God-given purpose or *telos*.

While there are many scholars from whom we could benefit, two companion guides seem to be particularly helpful in putting the myriad pieces of the biblical evidence concerning the kingdom together: George Ladd, writing from the perspective of biblical studies; and Thomas F. Torrance, writing from the perspective of theology. Both of these scholars have learned

from many others and draw on and refer to them. They have done a tremendous amount of sifting through the larger body of biblical and theological studies. They give primary weight to those whose understanding is in harmony with those more foundational biblical and theological assumptions mentioned above and who seem to offer the most coherent, comprehensive and consistent arguments concerning the kingdom of God. I will point out a number of the most important aspects of their conclusions that contribute to our growing faith and deepening understanding.¹

The centrality of Jesus Christ

Ladd and Torrance have both made it emphatically clear that the biblical revelation, in no uncertain terms, identifies the kingdom of God with the person and mission of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ himself embodies and brings the kingdom of God. Why? Because he is the King of all creation. His ministry as mediator between God and creation involves kingship as well as priestly and prophetic elements. The kingdom of God is real and actual in and through Jesus Christ, since he reigns wherever he is. The kingdom of God is his kingdom. Jesus tells us so: “I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:29-30).

At another time Jesus declares that the kingdom of God belongs to him. He says, “My kingdom is not from this world” (John 18:36). So the kingdom of God cannot be understood apart from who Jesus is and what his entire mission is about. Any study of Scripture or any theological synthesis of the exegetical material that does not interpret the kingdom of God on the basis of the person and work of Jesus Christ will be off-center. It will end up at a different place than one that operates from this living center of Christian faith.

Working from that center, what can we begin to understand about the kingdom of God? We should first note that it is Jesus himself who announces the arrival of the kingdom of God and makes this a comprehensive theme of his teaching (Mark 1:15). Jesus brings with him the actual presence of the kingdom, not just a message about the kingdom. The kingdom of God is operating wherever Jesus is—because he is the King. The kingdom of God has its reality in the living presence and activity of King Jesus.

Following on that point, then, what Jesus says and does conveys the character of his kingdom. The kingdom he offers has a character identical to his own. Jesus offers a certain kind of kingdom, one that embodies his own

character and purpose. Our ideas of the kingdom of God then must cohere with who Jesus is. Everything about it must remind us of him. It should look, sound, act, smell and carry itself in a way that points us to and reminds us of him so that we get the idea that this kingdom is his—it belongs to him and has his fingerprints all over it. The implication of this connection is that the kingdom of God is primarily about the rule or reign of Christ and not so much, as it has sometimes been put, about a realm or a spatial or geographical location. Wherever Christ's lordship is operating according to his will and purpose, there is found the kingdom of God.

More particularly, his kingdom must have to do with his redemptive purposes and so it is bound up with his incarnation, vicarious life, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and return for us, and for our salvation. That is, his rule as King cannot be understood apart from his revelatory and mediating ministry of also being Prophet and Priest. All three of these Old Testament offices (represented by Moses, Aaron and David) are uniquely combined and fulfilled in him.

The purpose of his rule and will is to bring his creation into and under his gracious protection and beneficence, that is, into fellowship, communion and participation with him by reconciling us to God through his self-offering. The ultimate result of being under his rule is for us to share in his rule and experience all the benefits of his kingdom. And this rule will be characterized by God's own love for us in Christ and worked out in us by the Spirit. Love of God and love of neighbor (in the way Jesus embodied it) will be marks of participating in his kingdom. The kingdom of God is a fellowship, a people, a community in communion with God through Jesus Christ and therefore with each other in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

But such love in fellowship, as shared in Christ, will emanate from a lived trust (faith/belief) in the redeeming, living God and his rule being continually exercised by Christ. So faith or belief in Jesus Christ will necessarily bring about involvement in his kingdom. This is because Jesus not only proclaims the nearness of the kingdom of God as he draws near, but he also calls for the response of belief (trust/faith) in its presence accompanying him. So we read: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (Mark 1:15). Belief in the kingdom of God cannot be separated from faith in Jesus Christ. Putting our faith in him means putting our trust in his rule or reign, that is, in his fellowship-creating kingdom. To love Jesus and the Father through him is to love and trust in all his ways that are embodied in his kingdom.

Jesus is King of kings over all the universe

The kingdom reign of Jesus Christ is universal and unrivalled. There is no corner of the cosmos that does not fall under his redemptive sway. So Jesus proclaims that all authority has been given him in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18)—that is, throughout all creation. All things were created through him and for him, notes the apostle Paul (Colossians 1:16).

Echoing back to God's promises to Israel, Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords (Psalm 136:1-3; 1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 19:16). The extent of his reign corresponds exactly to who he is: the one through whom all things were made and who upholds everything in existence by his power and life-giving will (Hebrews 1:2-3; Colossians 1:17).

It should be evident that this Jesus, the Lord of the universe, has no equal—no rivals, neither in terms of creation nor our great redemption. While there were contenders, pretenders and usurpers who had no power nor will to create or give life, Jesus has overcome and vanquished all enemies who refused his reign. As the incarnate agent of the Father in the power of the Spirit, this Son opposes all that opposes his good creation and God's good purposes for all creation.

The strength of his opposition to all that would maim and destroy his good creation and deviate from his glorious ends is proportional to his love for his good creation. Were he not to oppose that which would undo his creation, he would not be its loving Lord. Jesus with his heavenly Father and Holy Spirit is implacably opposed to all evil — everything that distorts, twists and destroys life and loving relationships in fellowship, first with him and in turn with each other and creation. To bring about his original ultimate purposes, all opposition to his rule and right must submit in repentance or be undone. Evil has no future in the kingdom of God.

So Jesus regards himself and is depicted by the New Testament witnesses as a redeeming victor who delivers his people from all evil, all enemies. He sets the captives free (Luke 4:18; 2 Corinthians 2:14). He transfers us from the kingdoms of darkness to his kingdom of light (Colossians 1:13). He “gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Galatians 1:4). It is in this sense that Jesus has “overcome the world” (John 16:33 NIV). And in doing so, he is “making all things new” (Revelation 21:5; Matthew 19:28). The cosmic scope of his reign and the absolute banishment of evil under his Lordship describe beyond our imaginations the wonder of his gracious kingdom rule.

¹ For the relevant works of Thomas F. Torrance, see his two volumes,

Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ and its companion *Atonement: the Person and Work of Christ*. For the relevant work of George E. Ladd, see his *A Theology of the New Testament*. We are under no obligation to slavishly follow either of these men's teachings and we may depart from any particular point if compelled by good reasons that are backed by biblical revelation, and when there seems to be a better alternative theological understanding.

PART 2

The kingdom's presence in two phases

Biblical revelation conveys two things that are hard to put together: that the kingdom is present but also that it is future. Biblical scholars and theologians have often seized on one of these two aspects, giving either one or the other prominence. But a significant consensus has developed over the past 50 years or so as to how best to grasp these two dimensions of the kingdom. That consensus coheres with who Jesus is.

The Son of God became incarnate by the virgin Mary about 2000 years ago and shared in our humanity and lived under our fallen condition here on earth for 33 years. Seizing our human nature¹ from conception to death, thereby uniting it with himself, he went through our death to resurrection and then after some days of appearances, ascended bodily, that is, remained united to our humanity, to return to the presence of the Father and full communion with him.

The result is that, although still sharing in our now glorified human nature, he is not present in the way he was before his ascension. He is, in a way, absent from earth. He has sent the Spirit as another comforter to be with us, but he in his own person is unavailable to us as he was. But he has promised us that he will return.

Parallel to this is the nature of the kingdom. It was “near” and active in Jesus’ earthly ministry. It was so near and available that it called for an immediate response, just as Jesus himself called for a response of faith in him. However, as Jesus taught, his rule and reign had not yet come in its fullness. There was more to come. That time will coincide with Christ’s return (often called his “second coming”).

So faith in the kingdom includes hope for the coming of the fullness of the kingdom as well. The kingdom was already present in Jesus and continues to be present by his Spirit. But its completion is not yet. This is often summarized by saying the kingdom of God is already, but not yet. George Ladd’s careful work solidified this way of understanding for many orthodox/evangelical Christian believers, at least in the English-speaking world (also see the article at www.gci.org/gospel/kingdom).

The kingdom and the two ages

The biblical understanding clearly distinguishes between two times, two ages, two epochs: the “present evil age” and what is called “the age to come.” We currently live in the “present evil age.” We live in hope of “the age to

come,” but we do not yet live in that age. We are still, in biblical perspective, in the present evil age. So we live between the times. Biblical passages that clearly indicate this scheme are ones like these (the NRSV translation is quoted throughout this article):

- “God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come” (Ephesians 1:20-21).
- “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father” (Galatians 1:3-4).
- “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life” (Luke 18:29-30).
- “So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous” (Matthew 13:49).
- Some “have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Hebrews 6:5).

This two-fold understanding of ages or epochs is unfortunately made less obvious by the fact that the Greek word for “age” (*aion*) is translated a number of ways, including “eternity,” “world,” “forever,” and “long ago.” Those translations contrast time with endless time, or this earthly realm with a future heavenly realm. While the idea of different ages or epochs includes these temporal or spatial contrasts, the word *aion* actually brings out a much more comprehensive contrast between qualitatively different kinds of life now and in the future.

So in some translations we read that the seeds that grow in certain soils are choked by the “cares of this world” (Mark 4:19). But since the Greek word *aion* is used, we should also take it to mean choked by “the cares of this present evil age.” So also in Romans 12:2 we read that we should not be conformed to this “world,” but we should also understand this to mean not conformed to this present “age.”

The words translated “eternal life” mean also having the life of the age to come. This is made clear in Luke 18:29-30, quoted above. Eternal life is “eternal,” but there is much more to that life, compared to life in this present

evil age, than just being much longer! It's life that belongs to a whole different age or epoch. The contrast is not just short compared to infinitely long life, but rather between life in our current age that is still fallen—infected by evil, sin and death—and life in the age to come, where all traces of evil will be eradicated. In the age to come, there will be established a new heaven and earth and a new relationship between them. That will be a whole different kind and quality of life—God's kind of life.

The kingdom of God then is ultimately aligned with the age to come, with the kind of life that is eternal, and also with Christ's return. Before he returns, we live in the "present evil age" and wait in hope for the age to come. We continue to live under fallen conditions, where nothing is ideal—where everything is less than perfect even though Christ is risen and ascended.

The surprising thing, however, is that even though we continue to live in the present evil age, by the grace of God we can experience in part the kingdom of God now. There is a way that it is present here and now before the present evil age is displaced. Unexpectedly, the future kingdom has broken into the present without bringing God's final judgment and the ending of this age.

The kingdom is here and now foreshadowed. We are given foretastes of it. We experience some of its blessings here and now. And we can belong to it, which means belonging to Christ, here and now, even though we remain in this present age. This is possible because the Son of God came into this present age and completed his mission and sent us his Spirit, even though he is not bodily present. We enjoy now the firstfruits of his victorious reign. But there is an interim period (or an "eschatological pause," as T.F. Torrance liked to phrase it) before Christ returns, where God's saving purposes continue to be worked out in this age.

Building on the biblical vocabulary, biblical scholars and theologians have used a variety of words to convey this complicated situation. Many, following George Ladd, have expressed this contrast by saying that the rule of God was *fulfilled* in Jesus, but is yet to be *consummated* by Jesus upon his return. The kingdom of God is already present, but it is not yet here in its fullness. Another way to express this dynamic reality is to say that the kingdom has been *inaugurated* but we wait for its completion. This understanding is sometimes referred to as "inaugurated eschatology." By the grace of God, the future has broken into the present!

The implications are that the total truth and reality of what Christ has done is now significantly hidden from view because we are living under the conditions of the Fall. In this present evil age the rule of Christ is real, yet

hidden. In the age to come, the kingdom of God will be manifested fully because all the remaining effects of the Fall will be removed. Then the full effects of Christ's work will be gloriously and universally manifested.² The contrast being made is between the kingdom hidden, as compared to being fully manifested — not between a kingdom present as compared to a kingdom that is absent.

The Spirit and the two ages

This view of the kingdom corresponds to what is revealed in Scripture about the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised and, with the Father, sent the Holy Spirit to be with us. He breathed on the disciples his Spirit and then on Pentecost the Spirit descended upon those gathered. The Spirit empowered the early church to be faithful witnesses to what was accomplished in Christ so that others may enter Christ's kingdom. The Spirit sends God's people out to the ends of the earth to proclaim the gospel of the Son of God. We thus join in the Spirit's mission.

However, we do not yet have the complete fullness of the Spirit and we are to hope in that completion some day. Paul indicates that our experience today is only a beginning. He uses the image of a down payment, pledge and earnest (*arrabon*) to convey the idea of an advance giving that is partial, that is, a security for the complete giving (2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5). The image of inheritance, used throughout the New Testament, also conveys the idea of having now in the present something that will surely be greater in the future. Note these words from Paul:

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will.... This is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory...so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints. (Ephesians 1:11, 14, 18)

Paul also uses the image of us having now only the "firstfruits" of the Spirit, not his fullness. We experience now only the beginning of the harvest, not its complete blessings (Romans 8:23). Another important biblical image is of having a "taste" now of what is to come (Hebrews 6:4-5). In his first epistle, Peter puts many of the pieces of the puzzle together when he writes about those who have been "sanctified by the Spirit":

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his

great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3-5)

Our present experience in the Holy Spirit is indispensable, though it is but partial. Our experience of the ministry of the Spirit now is connected to a much greater fulfillment that one day will be fully manifested. Our present experience fosters a hope that will not be disappointed.

This present evil age

That we are now living in the present evil age is crucial to understand. The earthly work of Christ, though finished and victorious, has not yet eradicated from this time, this epoch, all the effects of the Fall and all its consequences. So we should not expect the effects of the Fall to be obliterated before Jesus returns. The New Testament witness to the continuing fallen condition of the cosmos (including humanity) is pervasive.

In his high priestly prayer of John 17, Jesus prays that we not be taken out of our current situation — even though he knows that we will suffer and be rejected or persecuted in this age. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus points out that here and now we will not yet receive all that the kingdom offers, such as having our hunger and thirst for righteousness fulfilled. Rather, we will experience a persecution that mirrors his own. Just as clearly, he indicates that our longings will be fulfilled, but in the future.

The apostle Paul notes that our true selves, rather than being obvious, are “hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3). He points out that we are earthen vessels, which contain the glory of the presence of Christ but which do not yet appear glorious themselves (2 Corinthians 4:7), but one day will shine forth (Colossians 3:4). Paul indicates that “the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:31, cf. 1 John 2:8, 17) but that it has not yet reached the final end.

The author of Hebrews admits that it does not yet seem that all things are in subjection to Christ and his people (Hebrews 2:8-9), even though Christ has overcome the world (John 16:33).

In his epistle to the church in Rome, Paul notes how the whole creation has been “groaning with labor pains” and how “we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:22-23). Although Christ has completed his earthly ministry, our current state does not manifest the

fullness of his reign and victory. We remain within this present evil age. The kingdom is present, but not yet in its fullness.

¹ In Hebrews 2:16 the Greek word *epilambanetai* is best translated “seize,” not “help” or “concerned.” See Hebrews 8:9, where the same word is used for God’s taking Israel out of the grip of Egypt’s slavery.

² The Greek word used throughout the New Testament, and emphasized in the name of the last book of the New Testament, is *apokalypsis*. It can be translated “revelation,” “manifestation,” “uncovering,” “disclosure” “appearing” and “coming.”

PART 3

So far, we've looked at how Jesus is central to the kingdom of God and how the kingdom is now present. Now we'll see how this reality is a source of great hope for those who believe. Note Paul's words of encouragement in the book of Romans:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.... for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.... For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Romans 8:18, 20-21, 24-25)

Later, John wrote this:

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. (1 John 3:2-3)

The message regarding the kingdom is essentially one of hope—hope for ourselves and for all of God's creation. The pain, suffering and horrors that we experience in this present evil age are, thankfully, coming to an end. Evil has no future in the kingdom of God (Revelation 21:4).

Jesus Christ himself is not only the first word but also the last word. Or as we say in the vernacular: *he has the last word*. Therefore, we need not worry about where things will ultimately end up. We know. We can count on it. God will put everything right, and all those willing to humbly receive it will know it and experience it one day. It is, as we say, “a done deal.” The new heaven and new earth are coming with Jesus Christ as its resurrected Creator, Lord and Savior. God's original purposes will be consummated. The glory of God will fill the whole earth with his light, life, love and utter goodness.

And we will be vindicated—proven right and not fools—for having counted on and lived by that hope. We can benefit now, in part, by living in the hope of Christ's victory over every evil and in his power to renew all things. Acting out of hope in the sure coming of the fullness of the kingdom will affect our daily lives, our personal and our social ethics. It will affect how

we go through trials, temptations, suffering, and even our being persecuted for our hope in the living God.

Having hope will propel us to want others to join in and gain from that hope, a hope that does not depend on us, but on God's own working. And so the gospel of Jesus is not only a message about Jesus, but proclaims who he is and all he has accomplished—and that must include the hope in the consummation of his reign, his kingdom, his ultimate purposes coming to fruition. A full gospel must include notice of his sure return and the consummation of his kingdom.

Hope, but not predictability

However, such hope in the coming kingdom does not mean that we can predict the pathway to that sure and complete end. The ways that God now interacts with this age that is still passing away are largely unpredictable. That is because God is far wiser than we are. When and what God chooses to do out of his great compassion, takes into account everything in all time and space. We cannot possibly comprehend that. God could not explain it to us even if he wanted to. But it's also true that we don't need any more explanation than what has been demonstrated in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ. He remains the same, yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

God continues to act today exactly according to the character revealed in Jesus. One day, in retrospect, we will see this clearly. All that God does will be incorporated into and consistent with what we hear and see in the earthly life of Jesus. We'll look back and say, "Ah, yes, I now see how, when the Triune God did x, y, and z, that was just like him! It has the fingerprints of Jesus all over it. I should have known. I should have guessed. I should have suspected. That's just like Jesus; it all leads from death to resurrection and ascension."

Even in the earthly life of Jesus, what he would do and say was not predictable to those around him. The disciples had a difficult time keeping up with Jesus. Though we have the benefit of hindsight, the reign of Jesus is still being worked out, and so our hindsight doesn't give us (and we don't need to have) foresight that yields predictability. We can be sure, however, that God will be true to his nature, to his character as the triune God of holy love.

It also might be good to note that evil is unpredictable, unreliable, capricious, random and arbitrary. That, in part, is what makes evil, evil. So our experience in this age will have some of that same character insofar as

evil has some continuing effect. But God is counteracting and out-maneuvering the chaos and capricious conniving of evil—making it, in the end, serve his purposes—a sort of “forced labor.” For God allows only that which can be redeemed, for in the end it will come under Christ’s rule and reign with the establishment of a new heaven and earth by his death-defying resurrection power.

Our hope is in the nature and character of God, in his good purposes, not in being able to predict how and when God will act. It is Christ’s own redeeming victory that provides those who believe and hope in the coming kingdom with patience, longsuffering and endurance, all with peace. The end is not up for grabs and is not up to us. It is secured for us in Christ — and so, in this present age that is passing away, we need not be anxious about anything.

We will sometimes grieve, but not without hope. We will sometimes suffer, but with a trusting hope that our sovereign God oversees all, and allows nothing that he cannot fully redeem, and indeed, in principle, has already redeemed in Christ’s person and work. Every tear will be wiped away (Revelation 7:17; 21:4).

The kingdom is God’s gift and God’s accomplishment

A reading of the New Testament along with the Old Testament, which leads up to it, makes clear that the kingdom of God is God’s possession, God’s gift, God’s achievement — not ours! Abraham sought a city “whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). It belongs in the first place to the eternal Son of God, incarnate. Jesus identifies it as “my kingdom” (John 18:36). He announces it as his work—his accomplishment. He brings it; he sustains it. When he returns, he will bring the full extent of his saving work to completion. How could it be otherwise, when he is the King and his work gives the kingdom its essence, its meaning, its reality?

The kingdom is God’s achievement and it is God’s gift to mankind. A gift, by its very nature, can only be received—not earned or established by the receiver. So, what is our “part”? Even to put it that way is a bit dangerous. We have no “part” in making it real, in actualizing the kingdom of God. But we do receive it, enter into it and begin to experience some of the benefits of Christ’s reign even now as we live in the hope of its consummation.

However, the New Testament never speaks of us “building” or “creating” or “making” the kingdom. Unfortunately, such language has caught on in some Christian circles. Such misunderstanding is disturbingly misleading. The kingdom of God is not our project. We are not helping God, bit by bit,

realize his ideal kingdom. We are not somehow actualizing God's hope—making his dream come true!

While telling people that “God is depending on us” may get people to “do stuff for God,” such motivation tends to be short-lived, and often leads to burnout or disillusionment. But the most damaging and dangerous aspect of representing Christ and his kingdom this way is that it completely inverts God's relationship with us. God then becomes dependent on us.

The hidden assumption is that God cannot, then, be more faithful than we are. We somehow become the main actors in realizing God's ideal. God simply makes his kingdom possible and then assists us in making it real, as best he can, limited by our efforts. There is no real sovereignty or grace of God in this distorted scheme. It can only devolve into a “works righteousness” orientation that fuels pride or collapses into disappointment or perhaps even abandonment of the Christian faith.

The kingdom of God must never be presented as a human project or achievement, no matter what kind of sincere motivation or ethical conviction might move someone to do so. Such a misguided approach seriously distorts the nature of our relationship with God and misrepresents the extent of Christ's finished work. For if God cannot be more faithful than we are, then there is no saving grace. We must not fall back into a form of self-salvation, for in that, there is no hope.

PART 4

Our relationship to the coming kingdom of God

How should we understand our relationship, as believers, to a kingdom that the Bible says is now present, but is yet to come? Borrowing from Karl Barth, T. F. Torrance and George Ladd (others could be included) I think we can describe it this way: *We are called to experience now the blessings of and embody a witness to Christ's coming kingdom in partial, provisional and temporary ways.*

Our present experience of the kingdom, including our actions, as they are joined to Jesus' ongoing ministry in the power of his Spirit, stand as a witness or sign of the coming kingdom. A witness bears testimony not to itself, but to a reality of which the witness has first-hand knowledge. Similarly, a "sign" does not point to itself, but to another and far greater reality. As Christians, we bear witness to the thing signified—the coming kingdom. Thus our witness is important, but has certain limitations.

First, our witness is only a partial indicator of the coming kingdom of God. It does not, because it cannot, bear the whole truth and reality of the kingdom. Our actions cannot uncover the depth and scope of Christ's full reign, which, for now, remains largely hidden. Our words and actions may even obscure some aspects of the kingdom while pointing to other aspects. Our various acts of witness may, under fallen conditions, not seem to be entirely consistent with each other, or possibly even seem to contradict each other.

A perfect solution to every problem may not be achievable by us, no matter how sincere or committed or skilled. In some cases, every available choice may involve some unavoidable combination of advantages and disadvantages. A fallen world does not always allow a perfectly ideal solution, not even for the church. So the church's witness in this age will be partial.

Second, our witness provides only restricted vision that looks off towards the future and gives a glimpse of the coming kingdom. But it does not bring into the present an apprehension of its total reality. We see "dimly in a glass." That's what is meant by saying it's "provisional."

Third, our witness is temporary—what is accomplished comes and goes. Some of the things done in the name of Christ may remain viable longer than others. Some of our acts of witness may only be momentary and not be able to be sustained. However, as signs, our witness need not be permanent for it to do its job of pointing to what is permanent, the eternal reign of God through Christ in the Spirit.

Our witness, then, is not absolute, not perfect, not total and not permanent, though it has great and even indispensable value just because its value is gained by being relative to the coming reality of the kingdom, which is absolute, perfect and eternal.

Two false resolutions to the complex *already-not yet kingdom*

Some may ask, “What is the point, then, of our present experience and witness, if it is not the kingdom itself? Why bother? What good will it do? If we can’t establish the ideal, why invest any great effort or resources in such a project?” So these people opt to do nothing.

Others may respond by saying, “God would not call us to get involved in anything less than achieving the ideal and realizing perfection. With God’s help we can consistently make progress towards bringing the kingdom of God to earth.” So these people act as if it all depends on them.

Responses to the complexity of the “already but not yet” kingdom have most often, down through the history of the church, resulted in divergent answers much like the two indicated above. This has been the case even though there have been consistent warnings against both of these approaches, declaring them to be serious errors. Their formal names are quietism and triumphalism.

Triumphalism

Some who are not comfortable with merely experiencing and enacting signs insist that we do indeed build the kingdom—although with God’s help. They insist, for example, that we can be “world-changers” if only enough people would become really committed to the cause of Christ and would be willing to pay the price called for. If enough people try hard enough and are sincere enough and know the right techniques or methods, then gradually our world will more and more be transformed into the complete kingdom. Christ will then return as the kingdom is gradually brought to completion by our efforts. This is to be achieved, of course, with the help of God.

Although not overtly put this way, this way of thinking about the kingdom assumes that what we achieve is based on the *potential made possible* (but not actual or real) by the earthly ministry and teaching of Jesus Christ. Christ has triumphed in such a way that we now work out—actualize, or make real—the *possibility* established by Christ.

The triumphalist response tends to emphasize efforts that bring changes in the spheres of social justice and public morality, over changes in private relationships or personal morality. Enlistment of Christians in this program

is often promoted on the basis of indicating that God somehow is depending on us. God is looking for “heroes.” God has given us the ideal, the blueprint, the plan of his kingdom, so now all it takes is for the church to make it real and actual. The idea is that we have the potential to realize the ideal—if only we are convinced that this is true and are really, truly and radically committed and ready to show God how truly thankful we are for all that he has done to make our reaching the ideal possible. We have the potential to close the gap between the “real” and God’s ideal—so sign on right away.

Recruitment for the triumphalist program will often be fueled by the critique that the reason non-believing persons are not joining in, not becoming Christians or Christ-followers, is because the church does not do nearly enough to make the kingdom real and actual—to make God’s ideal way of life a present reality. The argument continues: There are so many nominal (in name only) Christians and outright hypocrites in the church who don’t love and pursue justice as Jesus taught, that unbelievers won’t join—and they have every right and reason not to! It is further claimed that the blame for why non-believers don’t become Christians is essentially because of half-hearted, compromised or hypocritical Christians.

The solution to this problem, therefore, is to get all Christians “fired up,” turning into *really committed* and *truly radical* people who begin living fully the kingdom life here and now. Only then, as Christians exemplify to a much greater extent God’s will and way, will the gospel of Christ become persuasive to others as they come to see and believe in the glory of Jesus Christ. To back up the point, people often (improperly) bring in Jesus’ saying, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” The implication is that if we don’t love enough, then others can’t or won’t come to faith. Their coming to faith depends on the extent of our being loving as Christ was.¹

Quietism

At the other end of the spectrum, the quietist response, some have addressed the already-not-yet complexity by deciding that there is nothing much that can be done now. They assume the glory is all in the future. Christ secured the victory in his earthly ministry, and he alone will bring it entirely to consummation at some time in the future. We are now simply waiting for Christ to return and to take us to heaven, perhaps after some years of reigning on earth.

While Christians will experience some spiritual blessings now (like the forgiveness of sins), creation, including nature itself and especially all social, cultural, scientific and economic institutions, are simply fallen, captive to evil.

These things cannot and will not be saved. They have no good purpose, as far as eternity is concerned. These things can only be condemned by the wrath of God and brought to a total end. People for the most part have to be removed from this fallen world to be saved.

Sometimes in accord with this quietist approach, a kind of separatism is taught—we must remain apart and be disconnected from the earthly endeavors of this world. For other quietists, the fact of the hopelessness and helplessness of this world means you can take advantage of it in many ways, since in the end it won't matter—it's all going to come under judgment.

For yet others, a passive or quietist approach means that the best that Christians can do is be an example set apart, individually or in community. The emphasis is often on personal, family and church morality. But direct attempts to influence or change things outside the Christian community are for the most part discouraged or sometimes even condemned. It is held that directly engaging the unbelieving surrounding culture could only amount to compromise and ultimate failure. So personal devotion and moral purity are the dominant themes.

Often, in this mode, the end of history is regarded as the termination of creation. It is destroyed. Created time and space are no more. Some people, those who believe, will be rescued from its dissolution and be taken away to the ideal, purely spiritual reality of an eternal heaven with God.

These two extremes are representative of tendencies. Many sub-variations and in-between positions operate in the church. But most operate somewhere along this continuum and tend to lean toward one side or the other. The triumphalist side tends to attract optimistic and “idealistic” personalities, while the main appeal of the quietist is among those who are more pessimistic or “realistic.” But again, these are large generalizations and are not meant to identify any particular groups that strictly conform to one extreme or the other. These are tendencies that in effect, one way or another, attempt to simplify the complexity of the already-not-yet truth and reality of the kingdom of God.

An alternative to triumphalism and quietism

But there is a more biblically and theologically viable alternative that not only avoids either extreme, but regards the very idea of such an either-or polarity as false—as not doing justice to the whole of biblical revelation. The triumphalist and quietist alternatives, and the debates between their respective representatives, both assume that the complex truth of the kingdom puts us in a situation in which a tension needs to be resolved. Either

God does it all, or we make it real. These two views make it seem we have to choose between being activists or being relatively passive, or figure out how to reside somewhere in the middle.

The biblical view of the already but not yet kingdom is complex. However, there is no tension that needs to be resolved. There is no balance to be achieved or some middle or moderate position between the two poles to be found. The present age is not in tension with the future coming age. Rather, we are called to live in this already-fulfilled-but-not-yet-consummated situation. We are situated now in a state of hope that, as we saw in part two of this series, the image of *inheritance* seems to represent quite well. We live securely now in confident possession of our inheritance, even though we don't have access to the assets we will one day fully benefit from.

¹ This saying of Jesus (John 13:35) does not declare that others will become *believers*, only that they will identify these disciples as belonging to Jesus since they love like he does. He's indicating that our love can be useful in directing others to him. That's wonderful. Who would want to miss out on that?

However, this saying does not assert that the belief/salvation of others depends on the extent of the disciples' love. On the basis of this verse, it is logically false to turn it into the negative claim that if the disciples do not love, then others *cannot* know they are disciples of Jesus and so *will not* believe in him. If that were the case, then God could never be more faithful than we are. It would not be true, then, that "if we are faithless, he remains faithful" (2 Timothy 2:13).

All who have ever come to faith have realized there are some inconsistencies and imperfections in the church as a whole and its individual members. They entrusted themselves to their Lord because they also realize the distinction between the One who is worshiped and the ones who worship. Consider your own faith and see if this isn't so. God is greater than our witness to him. God is more faithful than we are. This is no excuse to be unfaithful witnesses to the perfect love of Christ.

PART 5

Participation in Jesus' ongoing kingdom ministry

Instead of triumphalism (activism that seeks to bring about the kingdom), or quietism (passivity that withdraws, leaving it all up to God), we are called to live hope-filled lives that embody real signs of the coming kingdom. Of course, such signs have limits—they do not build the kingdom, nor do they make it real and present. But signs do point beyond themselves to what is coming. They make a real difference here and now, even though they do not make all the difference. Signs make a relative difference, not an absolute difference. This accords with what God intends as the church lives in this present evil age.

Some who prefer either the triumphalist or quietist alternatives will object and say that setting out mere signs of the coming kingdom has little or no value. They say that signs are not worth the effort if they don't bring about lasting change—if they don't make the world a better place or, at least, bring others to faith in God. But what these objections overlook is that the partial, provisional and temporary signs that Christians can exhibit here and now are not to be regarded as separate from the coming kingdom.

Why not? *Because Christian action is participation in the continuing ministry of Jesus through the Spirit.* By the Spirit we join with the King in what he is doing here and now even within this present evil age—an age that is passing away! The God of the coming kingdom can break into the present and use the partial, provisional and temporary witness of the church. The church's witness makes a relative but real difference here and now, although it does not make the absolute difference that the consummation of the kingdom will achieve.

Light from the coming kingdom reaches us and lights our path in this dark world. Like starlight piercing the darkness of the night, the church's spoken and enacted signs point to the coming kingdom in full noonday sunlight. These pinpoints of light make a real difference, even if only partial, provisional and temporary. By the gracious action of God, our signs and witness are used by God's Word and Spirit to put people into contact with Christ and his coming kingdom.

God is at work even now before the kingdom reaches its consummation. We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us (2 Corinthians 5:20). Preaching as used by the Spirit does enable people to enter into and become members of the coming kingdom, here and now! (Romans 1:16). Every simple cup of water given in Christ's name will not go unrewarded (Matthew 10:42). So we shouldn't regard the signs or witness of

the church as being ethereal, mere symbols or gestures towards something absent and not yet real.

Christ joins our sign-work to his—using our witness to draw people into relationship with himself, then to come under his lordship, where they experience his joy, peace and hope in his final reign. This is so even though those signs do not convey the whole truth of the coming reality, but only point to it. They point forward as well as back to Jesus Christ, who has become Savior and King over all creation in his earthly life and ministry.

These signs are not mere ideas, words, concepts or individual, private, spiritual experiences. Christian signs embody, in time and space, in flesh and blood, a witness to who Jesus is and the nature of his coming kingdom. They take time and money and effort and skill, thought and planning, individual and corporate coordination. God can and does use them by his Spirit to serve a purpose—an actual introduction of persons to God in Christ. Such an introduction bears fruit in conversion that is evidenced in repentance and faith, and in lives lived out in hope of the coming kingdom.

So we commit to our Lord's use our time, energy, resources, vocations and leisure. We allow concerns about our current world to take concrete shape in activities, events, involvement and engagement with one another within our church communities. But they also take shape in relation to those who are not yet part of those communities.

Our embodied witness to Jesus can be personal and verbal, but it also should be public and social. We should make use of whatever resources we have at our disposal so that with everything we have, do and say, we broadcast on every channel available to us the same message of who God in Christ is and that his rule and reign is sure and is coming. We live now, even under fallen conditions, in communion with Christ and in hope of the full manifestation of his Lordship. We live in the hope of a renewed and thus a new heaven and earth in the age to come. We live in this age as if it were passing away—because under the impact of Jesus Christ, it is! We live now as if the kingdom is coming—because it is!

So our embodied Christian witness, although partial, provisional and temporary, is real in the sense that it affects our current situation and all our relationships, even if it does not embody itself the full reality of the coming kingdom that is not yet fully here. It is real in the sense that by the grace of God, we participate, in mustard-seed type of ways, in what God is now doing by the Spirit to point people to Jesus Christ and his coming kingdom. We can today experience some of the blessings of the reign of Christ and his kingdom at both the personal and social dimensions of life, as God allows.

The real manifested

To fill this out just a bit more, we can note that our actions do not establish or vindicate the reality of Christ's lordship, rule and reign. God—Father, Son and Spirit—has already done that. The coming kingdom is real and fulfilled. Its coming has been guaranteed to us. We can count on it, and its coming doesn't depend on us. This is a work of God.

So if we, by our witness—by our embodied signs—do not actualize the kingdom of God nor make it progressively more real, what do we accomplish? The answer is that our embodied signs make manifest in small bits and pieces the coming kingdom. Our purpose and privilege now is simply and profoundly to be, in word and deed, witnesses to the reality of the kingdom!

What then will the end, the return of Christ, accomplish? His return does not make the kingdom finally real, as though it was only a potential up to the time of his return. It is, right now, fully real, actual. Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior now. He is reigning. But that kingdom is now hidden. The full effects of his reign are not exhibited in the present evil age. When Christ returns, the reality of the kingdom will then be fully manifested—be made obvious, will have its full effect. Christ's second coming or appearance (his *parousia*) will be a revelation, manifestation, uncovering (an *apocalypsis*) of the truth and reality of who he is and what he has accomplished.

At that time, the truth and reality of who Christ is and what he has done for us and our salvation will be revealed to all. It will amount to the final unveiling of what took place in the Person and work of Christ. The glory of it all will shine forth everywhere so that it will have its full effect. The time for partial, provisional and temporary witness will be completed. The kingdom of God will no longer be hidden at all. We will enter the new heavens and earth. There will be no more need for witness, for we will all stand before the reality itself. That's what Christ's return will accomplish.

So the Christian life is not about making actual the potential of the kingdom of God. We are not tasked with closing the gap between the reality of the fallen world and the ideal of God's kingdom on earth so that by our efforts God's ideal finally supplants the reality of the broken and rebellious creation. No, the reality is that Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords, and his kingdom is real and actual—although now hidden. This present evil age is passing away. We are now living in a kind of unreality, with a corrupted, twisted, distorted form of God's good creation that Christ has won back, being victorious over the powers of evil and putting it back on track to serve

its original purpose, to reach God's final intention.

Through Christ, the entire creation is being freed from its bondage and groaning (Romans 8). Christ is making all things new. That is the decisive and determining reality. But that reality is yet to be fully manifest. Nevertheless, we can bear witness now in partial, provisional and temporary ways in every area of life to that coming reality as God's Spirit moves us. In doing so, we are not bearing witness to a possibility, especially one that we make real, but to Christ and his kingship, which will be fully manifested one day. That reality is our sure hope—one that we live by today and every day.

The civic and political spheres

What are the civic and political implications for Christians who acknowledge Christ's Lordship and hold the hope of the coming kingdom? The biblical revelation does not support the idea of a Christian "takeover" of any political party or any nation or institution outside the worshipping community. But neither does it call for non-involvement—what is called "separatism."

Christ prayed that we not be taken out of this fallen and corrupted world (John 17:15). Members of ancient Israel, when in exile in a foreign land, were told to seek the welfare of the cities they inhabited (Jeremiah 29:7). Daniel served God in the midst of a pagan culture and contributed to it while being faithful to the God of Israel. Paul tells us to pray for civil authorities and to respect human authority that promotes good and hinders evil. He instructs us to maintain good reputations among those who are not yet believing. These admonitions indicate contact, involvement and even responsibility to our common citizenship and institutions, not complete separation.

Biblical teaching indicates that we are citizens of this age. But, at the same time, it announces that we are, more importantly, citizens of God's kingdom. So Paul proclaims in his letters: "You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19), and says, "Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20).

Christians have a new citizenship that takes unrivaled precedence over any current earthly citizenship. However, it does not obliterate our old citizenship. When jailed, Paul did not repudiate his Roman citizenship, but made use of it to secure his release. As Christians, our old citizenship is radically relativized—brought into submission to Christ's reign. Here again we meet a complex situation; one that can lure us to seek a resolution or

attempt a simplification. But faith, hope and love lead us to live in the complexity for the sake of our witness to the kingdom and the reign of Christ.

Dual citizenship

Following Karl Barth's synthesis of biblical teaching, and mindful of church teaching down through the ages, it seems that those who belong to Christ and his kingdom in this present age simultaneously belong to two very distinct communities. We have dual citizenship. This complex situation seems unavoidable, because it aligns with the truth that there are two ages that overlap, but only one that will, in the end, prevail, namely, the age to come.

Each of our citizenships has unavoidable responsibilities, and there is no guarantee that they won't come into conflict. There is especially no guarantee that there will be no cost involved in seeking to be responsible to both. So Jesus tells his disciples, "As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them" (Mark 13:9). Similar situations took place throughout the book of Acts, mirroring what happened to Jesus himself. So conflicts may arise between our dual citizenships that may be hard if not impossible to entirely resolve in this present age.

Relating the dual responsibilities around the one true center

It is important to discern how these two sets of responsibilities are properly interrelated. It is usually not helpful to think of them as competing, even if at times they come into conflict. Nor is it helpful to regard them as being ordered in a hierarchical layering, where there is always a first and then, subsequently, a second or third action or decision called for after the prior things are fully taken care of. In that case, many if not most secondary things will end up being neglected, rarely attended to.

Nor is it useful to use a slightly different hierarchical scheme—thinking that the secondary things are to be pursued in a way separate from the primary or first things. In this scheme, we make sure we take care of the first things of the church community, and then we also take care of the secondary things in the civic community, as if the secondary things are relatively independent, having their own norms or standards, ends or aims that determine what responsibility looks like in that sphere outside the church.

Such an approach amounts to a compartmentalization that doesn't do justice to the fact that the kingdom has broken into this age and so we live now between the times, in the overlap.

The first things of the church's witness always influence and shape how we engage the secondary things of our earthly commonwealth. The two sets of responsibilities overlap one another, with our hope and witness to the coming kingdom informing all we do, whether primary or secondary.

Given the lordship of Christ, the unity of God's purpose for all creation and the consummation of all things under Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords, God's single purpose stands at the center of all reality—at the center of both communities to which we belong.¹ All human activity ought to be arranged, organized, ordered and even made to serve that center.

Think of the Triune God as being at the center of a series of circles all sharing that same center. Jesus Christ, with his coming kingdom, is this center. The church, which belongs to Christ, knows and worships him alone, stands in the innermost circle surrounding the center. The church knows this center. It knows the character of the coming kingdom. It has a sure foundation for its hope and a grip on the nature of love and righteousness and justice and even of genuine human community in Christ. Its ministry is to proclaim that center and invite others to come into that innermost circle, because that's the source of their life and hope.

All should belong to both communities! The center of their existence is the center of the church's existence, even if their current allegiance is only and primarily to the wider civic community. God in Christ according to his purposes is the center of all created reality, of both communities. Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior of all creation—of every power and authority, whether they know it or not.

The civic community outside the church can be thought of as a surrounding circle located at a greater distance from the center than the inner circle of the church community. It does not know or acknowledge the center, and its God-given mission is not to proclaim that center. Its purpose is not to become or replace the church community (as was attempted by Nazi Germany and assented to by the leaders of the German state church).

Nor is the church to become the larger community, taking over its functions. But the surrounding civic community (even though it does not know it) does have the same center, and its destiny is bound up entirely with Jesus, who is Lord over all time and space, over all history and all authority. Our common civic community is not independent of the same center, the

same living reality which the church acknowledges and gives ultimate allegiance to.

So the church's responsibility, with its individual members who live in both circles, is to inform and continually remind that wider circle of the central reality of Jesus and his coming reign. It does so by seeking to embody within that wider community ways of acting, functioning, being, and relating that, although indirectly, point to that same central reality. These ways, embodied in the wider circle of responsibility, will have a resonance or be analogous to the ways of the church. But they will only be able to reflect them indirectly, dimly and likely inconsistently — and not without some ambiguity. But that is to be expected. The wider community is not the church and is not expected to be the church. But it is to continually benefit from the church as its members seek to be responsible to it also, as unto the Lord.

Analogous signs of preservation

The fact that we are operating in this present evil age will be especially evident in this wider sphere of citizenship to those who hope in the age to come and know and worship the Living Center. The theological foundations and spiritual resources of open communion with God through Christ will not be apparent or made readily available through those civic activities dedicated to serving the surrounding community. But the practices, standards, principles, rules, laws, ways of being and relating in that wider sphere can more or less be aligned with or become somewhat parallel to the life God has for us in Christ.

Christian influence will seek to engage the wider sphere of responsibility in a prudent manner, attempting to realize at any given moment the most it can of the patterns of organization and principles of behavior and practice that best align with God's purpose and ways, ways that will one day be manifest to the whole world. The church serves as a kind of conscience for the wider community. It seeks to prevent the surrounding community from falling further away from God's purpose and design for humanity. It does so not just through its pronouncements but through personal involvement that will also, no doubt, include personal cost. By word and deed, it serves as a kind of preservative, even though, at times, its wisdom, warnings and involvement may go unheeded or be rejected.

Infusing indirect signs of hope

The members of the church can also inject into the surrounding culture social material products as well as patterns of organization and production

that are informed by the gospel of Christ—as a kind of leaven, or light. But such a witness will only be able to serve as an indirect pointer that will only be analogous to the church’s direct ministry and message concerning God in Christ and the presence and coming of his kingdom. These creative efforts, which serve as indirect signs, should not be substituted for the life of the church or for its central message and ministry. Jesus or God or Scripture will likely not be mentioned at all. The source behind these actions will rarely (if at all) be mentioned, although what is done or accomplished will have the aroma of Christ about it.

There will be limits to such indirect witness. It will likely be somewhat ambiguous compared to the church’s direct witness and ministry. The results will likely be inconsistent compared to the church’s primary word and witness. Sometimes what Christians propose for the common good will not be allowed or be severely restricted by various public or private powers, influences and authorities. At other times these proposals may be allowed to persist in a way that leads to having wide, kingdom-directed impact. The ministry of Chuck Colson’s Prison Fellowship serving in state or federal prisons is a good example of this.

Just how much influence might be allowed is unpredictable. Some successes may be disappointingly temporary. And there will be failures. But those who gladly receive even these indirect witnesses that conform at some distance to God’s will and ways, will be drawn by them to the heart of what the church has to offer. They will serve as a kind of pre-evangelistic preparation.

The primary responsibility of the surrounding civic community is to provide a good and just order so that, whether intended or not, the church can carry out its essential ministry as the church, and so that its members can be allowed to live out their indirect witness within the wider community. Much of its aim will be the establishment of the rule of law, of public justice. It will aim for the common good. It will protect the weak from being taken advantage of by the strong.

This seems to be what Paul had in mind when he described the proper responsibilities of the secular authorities in Romans 13. It may also reflect what Jesus meant when he said: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21, ESV) and what Peter wrote: “For the Lord’s sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right” (1 Peter 2:13-14).

¹ The following section makes use of much of the biblical/theological synthesis found in Karl Barth's little book, *Community, State and Church: Three Essays*, especially the third essay, "The Christian Community and the Civil Community."

PART 6

The church and the kingdom

Broadly speaking, three views have been suggested regarding the relationship of the church and the kingdom of God. The view that fits with the biblical revelation and with a theology that takes the person and work of Christ and the Spirit into full account aligns well with what George Ladd laid out in his *Theology of the New Testament*. Thomas F. Torrance has helpfully brought out some important implications for such a view.

Some have thought of the church and the kingdom of God as being essentially identical. Others have regarded them as distinct, if not entirely separate.¹ Grasping the complete biblical account requires a comprehensive survey of the New Testament involving many passages and subtopics, which Ladd has done. On that basis, he offers a third alternative, namely, that the church and the kingdom are not identical but that they cannot be separated. They overlap.

Perhaps the simplest way to indicate the relationship is to note that the church is the people of God. These people are the subjects of the kingdom, but they cannot be equated with the kingdom that is identical with the full rule and reign of God through Christ in the Spirit. The kingdom is perfect, but the church is not. The subjects are subjects of the King, but they are not the King himself and should not be confused with him.

The church is not the kingdom of God

In the New Testament the church (*ekklēsia* in Greek) is identified as the people of God gathered or assembled into a fellowship in this current age (the time since Christ's first advent). They gather in response to the proclamation of the gospel taught by the first apostles—those who were authorized and sent by Jesus himself. The people of God receive the message of the biblical revelation preserved for us and who, by repentance and faith, respond to the reality of who God is as disclosed in that revelation. As described in the book of Acts, they are the ones who “devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

At first, the church was made up of faithful remnants of ancient Israel who believed that Jesus fulfilled the promises made to them as God's Messiah and Redeemer. But almost immediately, beginning with Pentecost, the people of God expanded to include all nations, tongues and ethnicities (*ethnoi*). The people of God thus became international, fulfilling God's promises to bless

all nations through Israel (Genesis 12:2-3) and to pour out the Spirit upon all people (Joel 2:28).

According to Peter, the church is an international priesthood for the sake of all the nations (1 Peter 2:9-10). God's intention for this reconfiguration of his people was demonstrated at Pentecost by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon representatives of a host of the nations of the earth who had been drawn together in one place (Acts 2).

There is one church, one multinational people, meeting or gathering in numerous local congregations. Together they are the church or the body of Christ. The church gathers around Christ and his Word, being drawn by his Spirit as God works through those called to preach and teach. They then pass on the good news of Christ and his present and coming kingdom. This much is clear in Paul's writings regarding the nature of the church (see, for example, Ephesians 4:4-6).

God's people under grace, not the ideal people

However, the New Testament indicates that this people will not be ideal, will not be perfect. This comes out especially in the parable of the gathering of fish in the net (Matthew 13:47-49). The church community, gathered around Jesus and his word, will eventually need to be sorted out. There will come a time when it will become clear that some who have been associated with this community have not been receptive and responsive to Christ and the Spirit, but have actually resisted and rejected them. That is, some who have been a part of the community will not have come under Christ's rule and reign but rather have refused to repent and receive the grace of God's forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit. Others will be inconsistent in their response and receptivity to the working of Christ in submission to his word.

All will have to fight the fight of faith every day. All will be addressed and compassionately confronted by the Spirit's work of sharing with us the sanctification Christ himself worked out in his humanity—a sanctification that calls for daily dying to our old, false selves. So the life of this church community will be mixed, not ideal, not pure. The church will therefore continually live in God's grace. It will be the first to repent—and be continually renewed and restored.

Much of the instruction given to the church throughout the New Testament indicates an ongoing process of renewal that includes repentance, faith, growth in understanding, prayer, resisting temptation, correction and restoration. None of this would be needed if the church were expected to manifest the ideal now. The shape of this dynamic life of growth fits well

with the idea that the kingdom of God is not manifested in its fullness in this age. The people of God are those who wait in hope—their lives are hidden in Christ (Colossians 3:3), often looking now like ordinary earthen vessels (2 Corinthians 4:7). We too are waiting to enter into our full and complete salvation.

The kingdom preached, not the church

It should be noted, as does Ladd, that the first apostles did not preach the church. Rather, they preached the kingdom of God. Those who responded positively to their message then drew together as the church, as Christ's *ekklesia*. This means that the church, the people of God, is not an object of faith or worship. Only the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are objects/subjects of faith and worship.

The preaching and teaching of the church should not make itself the object of faith, should not be preoccupied with itself. This is why Paul points out that “what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Corinthians 4:5, ESV). The message and ministry of the church should point away from itself to the reign of the Triune God, the source of its hope—because God will establish his reign throughout creation, a reign inaugurated by Christ in his earthly ministry and in the coming of the Spirit, but yet to be consummated. The church gathered around Christ looks back to his finished work and forward to the completion of his continuing work. Those are the proper objects of its focus.

The kingdom of God is not the product of the church

The distinction between the kingdom and the church is also apparent in that the kingdom is strictly spoken of as the work and gift of God. It cannot be erected or built by humans, not even those who are part of God's new fellowship. In the New Testament, persons can receive, enter and inherit the kingdom, but they cannot destroy it or bring it to earth. They can do things for the sake of the kingdom, but the kingdom is never subject to human agency. Ladd is especially emphatic on this point.

The kingdom of God: inaugurated but not yet consummated

The kingdom has been inaugurated, but is not yet fully manifested and consummated. As Ladd likes to say, it is “already, but not yet.” The kingdom on earth is not yet fully realized. All people, whether joined to the fellowship of the people of God or not, live in this as-yet-to-be-consummated epoch of

time.

The church itself, the fellowship of people gathered around Jesus Christ with his gospel and mission, does not escape the problems and limits of still living under fallen conditions subject to sin and death. Thus the church needs continual renewal and refreshment. It needs continuously to abide or remain in fellowship with Christ, living under his Word, being continually nourished, renewed and restored by his gracious Spirit.

Ladd summarized the relationship of the church and the kingdom in these five points:²

- 1) The church is not the kingdom.
- 2) The kingdom creates the church—the church does not create the kingdom.
- 3) The church witnesses to the kingdom.
- 4) The church is the instrument of the kingdom.
- 5) The church is the custodian of the kingdom.

In sum, we can say that the kingdom of God includes the people of God, but not all those who gather with the church at any given time are necessarily submitting to the kingdom-reign of Christ. The people of God are those who have entered the kingdom and are submitting to the rule and reign of Christ, but some of those associated with the church at any given time may not manifest very much of the character of the present and coming kingdom. Some may still be resisting God's grace offered to them by Christ in and through the church's ministry.

So we see that the kingdom and the church are inseparable, though not identical. When the kingdom comes in its fullness with Christ's return, the people of God will all come fully under his rule and reign, and their lives together will perfectly manifest that truth.

Implications of the distinction yet inseparability of the church and the kingdom of God

There are many implications related to the distinction between the church and the kingdom of God. We can only touch here on a few here.

Embodying concrete witness to the coming kingdom

An important implication of both the distinction and the inseparability of the church and kingdom is that the church is to be the concrete and visible manifestation of the coming kingdom. Thomas F. Torrance was especially emphatic about this in his teaching. Although the kingdom of God is not yet fully manifest, the church in its common life is to embody a witness here and now in the present fallen age to what is not yet fully present. That is, the

church is not simply a spiritual reality that cannot be grasped or experienced here and now, just because the kingdom is not yet fully present. By the Word and Spirit and in union with Christ, the people of God can give concrete evidence in time and space, in flesh and blood, to the watching world of the character of the coming kingdom.

The church will not do this completely or perfectly or permanently. However, since Christ has been victorious over sin, evil and death itself, and since we can have real hope in the coming kingdom, then by the power of the Spirit in union with Christ, the blessing of the coming kingdom can be given form and shape by the people of God.

The primary sign of that coming kingdom is summed up by love—love that mirrors the love of the Father for the Son in the Spirit and the Father’s love for us and his entire creation through the Son and in the Spirit. The church can bear witness to the lordship of Christ in its worship and in its common life as well as in its service to bring about the common good of those not a part of the Christian community.

The single and central evidence the church can give to this reality is its offering of communion at the Lord’s Table as interpreted by the preaching of the Word in its worship. Here, in the church gathered, we have the most concrete, simple, real, direct and effective witness to the grace of God in Christ. At his table we experience the already-and-not-yet reign of Christ in person by the Spirit. At the Lord’s Table we look back to his cross and forward to his kingdom as we share in fellowship with him, as he is present by the Spirit. At his table we get a foretaste of his coming kingdom. We come forward to the Lord’s Table to receive Christ, just as he is proclaimed, as our Lord and Savior.

God is not finished with any of us

Living between the times of Christ’s first advent and his second advent has another important implication. It means that everyone is on a spiritual pilgrimage—in an on-going “becoming” relationship with God. God is not finished with anyone in drawing them to himself and in transforming them to trust him more and more and receive his grace and new life every moment of every day.

The church’s mission is to continue to proclaim and live out as best it can the truth of who God in Christ is and to continually bear witness in word and deed to the nature and character of Christ and his coming kingdom. Yet, we cannot know ahead of time who will turn out to be weeds or bad fish (to use Jesus’ imagery). God has to do the final sorting himself, in his own time. It is

not up to us to speed up (or slow down) the process. We are not the final judges here and now. Rather, we are to remain faithful and patiently discerning while hopeful of God's work in everyone by his Word and Spirit. Staying "on message" and keeping first things first, majoring in the majors and minoring in the minors is important in this time between the times. And of course, we must discern which is major and which is minor.

Second, the church provides a fellowship of love. The church's primary "job" is not to insure an ideal or absolutely pure church by making its priority keeping out or rooting out those people who join in the fellowship of God's people but who are not yet believing or whose lives do not yet manifest much of the life of Christ. It is impossible to do so in this present age. As Jesus taught, attempting to dig out the tares (Matthew 13:29-30) or separate the fish (verse 48) in this age will not bring about an ideal fellowship, but will instead damage the body of Christ and its witness. It will always amount to some "lording it over" others in the church. It will add up to a severe and judgmental legalism that will not represent Christ's own ministry, nor faith and hope in Christ's coming kingdom.

Third, the mixed nature of the church assembly also does not mean that just anyone can serve in its leadership. The church is not at root a popular democracy, even if some of its practical deliberations are conducted in that manner. There are clear criteria for church leadership noted in various places in the New Testament and practiced in the early church as recorded in the book of Acts, for example. Leadership is a matter of spiritual maturity and wisdom. Leaders must be prepared, and exhibit maturity in their relationship with God through Christ according to Scripture. Their lives will come to exhibit a genuine, joyful and free desire to serve Jesus Christ above all by participating in his ongoing mission and ministry out of faith, hope and love.

But finally and most importantly, leadership in the church is a matter of Christ's calling by the Spirit and the confirmation by others to the Spirit's calling or appointing individuals to serve in particular ways. Exactly why some are called and others are not will not always be known. So some, who by grace have great spiritual maturity, still might not be called to formal or ordained leadership! God's calling to leadership or not has nothing to do with God's approval of them or not. It has to do with the often hidden wisdom of God. However, given the criteria laid out in the New Testament, confirmation of their calling will include the matter of character, reputation and weighing evidence of their willingness and ability to equip, encourage and enable the members of the local congregation to trust in Christ and to join in his mission as best they can at any given moment.

Hopeful discipline and discernment

Living between Christ's advents does not rule out the need for appropriate church discipline, but it will be a discerning, patient, compassionate and even longsuffering discipline in hope for every individual because of God's love for all. It will not, however, allow members to trample fellow sheep (Ezekiel 34) but will take measures to protect them. It will give hospitality, fellowship, time and space for people to seek God and his kingdom ways, and time to repent, receive and grow towards Christ. But there will be limits as to what is allowed, so as to monitor and limit harm done to other members.

We see this dynamic at work in the early life of the church in the New Testament. The book of Acts and the epistles bear witness to this internal ministry of discipline within the church. It calls for wise and compassionate leadership. However, it will not be possible to attain perfection in church discipline. Nevertheless, it must be pursued because the alternatives — either no discipline at all or harsh, judgmental and self-righteous idealism — are both wrong ways to go, and unfaithful to Christ.

Christ accepted all those who came to him, but he never left them where they were. Rather, he directed them to follow him. Some did and some didn't. Christ accepts us all where we are, but in order to take us where he is going. The church's ministry is one of receiving and welcoming, but also of directing and disciplining those who remain to repent and trust in Christ and to follow in his ways. Although, as a last resort, dis-fellowshipping may be necessary, it should be done in the hope of future restoration, as we have example in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Corinthians 2:5-7; Galatians 6:1).

The church's message of hope in Christ's continuing ministry

Another implication of the distinction and connection between the church and kingdom is that the message of the church must include speaking about the continuing work of Christ, not just the completed work of the cross. That is, our message should indicate that all the effects of what Christ has accomplished through his saving work have not yet been worked out in history. His earthly ministry did not bring about and was not intended to bring about an ideal world here and now.

The church is not the realization of God's ideal. The gospel we preach should not lead people to believe that the church is the kingdom, God's ideal. Our message and example should include a word of hope about Christ's coming kingdom. It should be clear that the church is made up of a mixed

people, people who are on the way, people who are repenting and being renewed and restored to faith, hope and love.

The church, then, is a herald of that coming kingdom, of the fruit guaranteed by Christ himself, crucified and resurrected. The church is the people who live in the presence of the kingdom by the grace of God each day and in hope of the consummation of Christ's rule and reign in the future.

Repenting of idealism to take up hope in the coming kingdom

Too many have gotten the idea that Jesus came to set up here and now an ideal people or to establish an ideal world. The church itself may have given this impression, perhaps thinking that is what Jesus intended. It may be that much of the unbelieving world rejects the gospel because the church has failed to achieve the ideal community or world.

Many seem to believe that Christianity offers a form of idealism—but then they notice that such idealism has failed to be realized. Consequently, some reject Christ and his gospel because they're looking for an established ideal, or at least one that can be realized soon, and find that the church doesn't have this to offer. Some will want the ideal now, instantly or nothing at all.

Others may reject Christ and his gospel because they have given up altogether and have already lost hope in everyone and everything, including the church. Perhaps some have left the community of faith because the church did not realize an ideal they thought God was going to help his people accomplish. Those making this assumption—which amounts to identifying the church with the kingdom—will conclude that either God failed (perhaps by not helping his people enough), or that his people failed (possibly by not trying hard enough). In either case, the ideal wasn't realized, so for many there seems to be no reason for continuing to be a part of this community.

But Christianity is not about becoming ideal people who realize an ideal community or world with God's help. This Christianized form of idealism insists that if we would just be pure enough, sincere enough, committed enough, radical enough, or clever enough with our strategies, we would make real the ideal that God desires for his people. Since this has never happened in the entire history of the church, the idealists know just where to place the blame—on others—on “so-called Christians.” In the end, the finger of blame often points back on the idealists, who find that they are also unable to meet the ideal. When this happens, idealism collapses into a heap of hopelessness and self-accusation.

The gospel truth is that by God's grace, the blessings of a future kingdom already have broken into this present evil age. Because this is so, we can share now in the benefits of what Christ has done before his kingdom is fully manifested and established. The primary evidence of the certainty of this coming kingdom is the life, death, resurrection and ascension of the living Lord. He promised the arrival of his future kingdom and taught us to expect now in this current evil age only a foretaste, a down payment, the first fruits, an inheritance of that kingdom to come. We must preach hope in Christ and his finished and continuing work, not Christian idealism. We do so by distinguishing the church and the kingdom while also noting its connection in Christ by the Spirit and our participation as witnesses—living signs and parables of the coming kingdom.

In summary, the distinction yet connection between the church and kingdom means that the church is not to be an object of worship or of faith, for that would be idolatry. Rather, the church points away from itself to Christ and his mission. It does have a share in that mission: to point away from itself, by word and deed, to Christ, who leads us in our worship and who makes us new creatures in him in hope of a new heaven and earth that can only be realized when Christ himself, the Lord and Savior of the universe, returns.

Christ's ascension and return

A final element that ought to contribute to our understanding the kingdom of God and our relationship to Christ's rule is Christ's ascension. Jesus' earthly ministry came to a close not with his resurrection, but with his ascension. Jesus left the earthly realm and the present age to relate to and interact with us in a different way. That way is through the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit, he is not absent. He is present in a certain way. Yet he is also absent in a certain way.

John Calvin used to say that Christ was "in a manner absent and in a manner present."³ Jesus indicates his being in some way absent by telling his disciples that he is going away to prepare a place where they cannot now follow him. He is going to be with the Father in a way he wasn't while on earth (John 8:21; 14:28). He knows his disciples may regard this as a disadvantage, but he instructs them rather to regard it as a step of progress and so of benefit to them, even though it does not represent the final and full benefit to come. The Spirit that was with them will now be able to be in them, indwell them (John 14:17).

However, Jesus also promises that he will return—and return in the same

way that he left—in human form, bodily, visibly (Acts 1:11). His being away for now corresponds to the kingdom not yet being consummated and so being, in a way, absent. The present evil age is in a state of passing away, ceasing to be present (see 1 Corinthians 7:31; 1 John 2:8; 1 John 2:1).

All things are now in the process of being put under the authority of the reigning King. When Jesus completes that phase of his ongoing ministry, he will return, and the extent of his universal rule and reign will be in full effect—all of who he is and what he has done will then be evident to everyone. Every knee will bow and everyone acknowledge the truth and reality of who he is (Philippians 2:10). Only then will the totality of his work be manifested.

So his absence indicates something important that corresponds with other teaching. While he is away, the kingdom will not be universally acknowledged. The extent of Christ's reign will not be fully manifested, but remain to a significant degree hidden. Many aspects of the current fallen age will continue to express themselves and do so even at the expense of those who identify with Christ and acknowledge his kingdom and his kingship. Suffering, persecution, and evil, both moral (enacted by human agents) and natural (the result of the fallenness of nature itself), will continue. Evil will continue to the extent that it will appear to some as if Christ was not victorious and his reign not preeminent.

Jesus' parables about the kingdom indicate that our present experience will involve a mixture of responses to the Word, living, written and preached. Some soils to one degree or another will resist the Word being sown, while others will receive it. The field of the world will contain both wheat and tares. The nets will catch fish both good and bad. The church will be persecuted, and those blessed in it will hunger for righteousness and peace and a clear vision of God.

Jesus does not envision the appearance of an ideal world once he has departed. Rather, he takes measures to prepare his followers to expect that his victory and redemption will only be fully apparent some time in the future.

This means that living in hope is essential to the life of the church, but not with the misguided hope (idealism really) that, with just a little more effort (or a lot) from a few more people (or a lot), we will realize the ideal, bring in the kingdom or gradually build the kingdom. Rather, the good news is that in God's good time—at just the right time—Christ will return in full glory and power, vindicating our hope and regenerating heaven and earth, making everything new.

The ascension reminds us that we should not expect Christ and his rule

and reign to be entirely manifested, but remain hidden at some distance. His ascension signals to us the need to continue to hope in Christ and the future outworking of what he accomplished in his earthly ministry. It reminds us to wait and live now confidently and expectantly for Christ to return, bringing with him the fullness of all his redemption as Lord of lords and King of kings, the Savior of all creation.

Conclusion to this series

With these words of hope we bring to a close our series on the kingdom of God. As incomplete as it is, I trust the God of all grace may find a way to edify you with it.

¹ For much of what follows I am indebted to Ladd's discussion, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 105-119.

² Ladd, pp. 111-119.

³ See Calvin's *Commentary* on 2 Corinthians 2:5:1-8.

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