

THE COMING KINGDOM – PART I¹

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Evangelical Confusion

The contemporary evangelical world is engulfed in the idea that the church is presently experiencing the messianic kingdom. The idea of the "kingdom" can be bewildering, especially considering how this term is loosely bandied about by today's evangelicals. Many ministries convey the notion that the kingdom is strictly a spiritual and present reality by indicating that they are "expanding the kingdom" through their evangelistic and missionary endeavors. Even Christian political activists sometimes argue that they are "bringing in the kingdom."

Such "kingdom now" theology factors prominently in the writings of various Emergent Church writers. Doug Pagitt proclaims, "And let me tell you 'Kingdom of God' language is really big in the emerging church."² Brian McClaren echoes:

He selected 12 and trained them in a new way of life. He sent them to teach everyone this new way of life...Even if only a few would practice this new way, many would benefit. Oppressed people would be free. Poor people would be liberated from poverty. Minorities would be treated with respect. Sinners would be loved, not resented. Industrialists would realize that God cares for sparrows and wildflowers-so their industries should respect, not rape, the environment. The homeless would be invited in for a hot meal. The kingdom of God would come-not everywhere at once, not suddenly, but gradually like a seed growing in a field, like yeast spreading in a lump of bread dough, like light spreading across the sky at dawn.³

McClaren further observes: "If Revelation were a blueprint of the distant future, it would have been unintelligible to its original readers...In light of this, Revelation becomes a powerful book about the kingdom of God here and now, available to all."⁴

Series Preview

Why do so many seem to believe that the messianic kingdom has already materialized? Is there a biblical basis for such a belief? Due to the dominance of kingdom now theology in modern evangelical thought, a fresh scriptural look at the notion of the kingdom is warranted. To this end, we begin a

¹ This article originally appeared in *Pre-Trib Perspectives*.

² Cited in Roger Oakland, *Faith Undone* (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails, 2007), 163.

³ Brian McClaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 111.

⁴ Cited in Oakland, *Faith Undone*, 158.

lengthy series on the subject of the kingdom. This series will seek to accomplish four goals. First, the biblical teaching on the kingdom of God will be surveyed from Genesis to Revelation. Only such an analysis will allow us to capture God's mind on this important subject. Second, this series will set forth some general problems with a New Testament based "kingdom now" interpretation. Third, this series will examine the isolated New Testament texts that kingdom now theologians use and show their insufficiency to convey kingdom now theology. Fourth, this series will note why this trend of equating God's present work in the church with the messianic kingdom is a matter believers should be concerned about since this theology radically alters God's design for the church.

An Important Distinction

At the outset, a distinction must be drawn between the universal kingdom and the theocratic (or mediatorial) kingdom. Such a distinction is justified since some verses present the kingdom as in a state of perpetual existence (Ps 93:1-2) while others indicate that the kingdom will be a future reality (Dan 2:44). Moreover, some verses depict the kingdom as universal in scope (Ps 103:19) while other verses picture the kingdom as earthly (Dan 2:35, 44-45). Furthermore, some verses present the kingdom as being directly ruled by God (Dan 4:17) while other verses depict the kingdom as being indirectly administered by God through a human agent (Ps 2:6-9). Thus, the universal kingdom is eternal, comprehensive, and under God's direct rule. By contrast, the theocratic kingdom is futuristic, earthly, and under God's indirect rule.⁵ Most theological persuasions agree that God's universal kingdom is a timeless reality existing to the present hour. However, theological disagreement relates to the alleged present manifestation of the theocratic kingdom. Thus, the focus of this series will not be upon the generally acknowledged universal kingdom but rather on what the Bible teaches concerning the theocratic kingdom.

Early Genesis and the Kingdom

The biblical story of the kingdom begins as early as the Garden of Eden. Here, God placed Adam and Eve in a position of authority over God's creation. Gen 1:26-28 says: "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" It should be noted that Adam and Eve were given authority over the physical realm (fish, birds, living things that move on the earth). Here, God arranged for humanity's first couple to govern God's creation on God's behalf. The technical term for this hierarchy is the office of

⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 397-98; Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 19-21; Renald Showers, "Critique of Progressive Dispensationalism," *Friends of Israel National Conference* (June 2003), 9-14.

Theocratic Administrator. This term simply refers to someone who governs for God. In other words, God ruled the world indirectly through the first Adam.

However, Satan soon took the form of a serpent with the specific goal of perverting and reversing this divinely ordained hierarchy. Instead of governing the physical world for God, Adam and Eve were influenced by creation (the serpent) to rebel against God (Gen 3). Such rebellion represented a top to bottom reversal of God's original intention for the office of Theocratic Administrator. Satan's success in inciting this rebellion effectively removed the office of Theocratic Administrator from the earth, as Satan became the ruler of the world (Luke 4:5-8; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2). What then is the story-line of the Bible? It is how this office is restored through the messianic kingdom. Just as God the Father originally intended to indirectly govern the physical world through the first Adam, He will one day govern the world through the Last Adam or God the Son.

The restoration of the physical kingdom or office of Theocratic Administrator as the dominant theme of the Bible has been recognized by numerous theologians. Note Charles Ryrie's explanation:

Why is an earthly kingdom necessary? Did He not receive His inheritance when He was raised and exalted in heaven? Is not His present rule His inheritance? Why does there need to be an earthly kingdom? Because He must be triumphant in the same arena where He was seemingly defeated. His rejection by the rulers of this world was on this earth (1 Cor. 2:8). His exaltation must also be on this earth. And so it shall be when He comes again to rule this world in righteousness. He has waited long for His inheritance; soon He shall receive it.⁶

The late Dr. Harold Hoehner of Dallas Theological Seminary used to terrify doctoral students during oral exams by asking them how they would defend the notion of a future earthly kingdom from the Scriptures. Nervous students would usually start with Rev 20:1-10, which speaks of the future one-thousand-year reign of Christ. Hoehner would then ask the student to find an earlier biblical reference to the coming kingdom. Students then typically went first to Paul, then Christ, then the prophets, and finally the covenants (defined later) to find scriptural support for the coming kingdom. When Hoehner again asked for something earlier, the student was forced to go back to Genesis 1. The learned professor was simply trying to get his students to understand that the theme of a future, earthly kingdom begins on the Bible's very first page. One day God the Father will restore what was lost in Eden. He will again rule the world indirectly through a human intermediary. This human intermediary will not be the original Adam but rather the Last Adam or the unique God-man Jesus Christ who is the second member of the Trinity.

⁶ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 511.

The Mother-Child Cult

The next major place in God's word that speaks to the reality of a future messianic kingdom are those sections that reveal God's covenants with His special nation Israel. It is helpful to understand why God created and entered into a covenant with Israel. According to tradition, Nimrod, the leader of the rebellion at the Tower of Babel (Gen 10:8-9), and his wife Semiramis became the founders of the mystery religion known as the Mother-Child Cult. Their son Tammuz born through an alleged miraculous conception was killed by a wild animal and miraculously raised to life. This event led to the worship of the mother (Semiramis) and the child (Tammuz). When God confounded the languages at Babel consequently ushering in multiple ethnicities (Gen 11:1-9), this Mother-Child Cult was exported into every culture that followed. Although the names of the mother and the child were changed from culture to culture, these religions still epitomized the same idolatrous religious system began at Babel. In Assyria, the mother was Ishtar and the child was Tammuz. In Phoenicia, it was Astarte and Baal. In Egypt, it was Isis and Osiris or Horus. In Greece, it was Aphrodite and Eros. In Rome, it was Venus and Cupid.⁷ Given the idolatrous origin of these nations, God through Abram began a new nation independent of this universal impact at Babel. This nation, later called Israel (Num 24:17), would become His vehicle of exporting His messianic blessings to the world (Gen 3:15; 12:3).

(To Be Continued...)



⁷ Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons* (reprint, New York: Loizeaux, 1959), 19-90; John Walvoord, "Revelation," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. Walvoord and Zuck (CO: Victor, 1983), 970.