

# **The Doctrine of the Kingdom**

J. Seth Wallace

## Introduction

It is enjoyable to think back to one's Sunday School days and the Bible stories of the kings of Israel when one hears the term "the Kingdom of God." After all, isn't that what God had in mind when He made the promise of an everlasting kingdom? Is not the nation of Israel due a reinstated kingdom according to the promises of the Old Testament prophets? Although no evangelical Christian would deny Christ's kingly office or the sovereignty of God, the meaning of the term "Kingdom of God" is certainly varied across Christianity.

There are three basic views of the Kingdom of God. The first shall be called the "liberal hope" view of the Kingdom. In this view, the Kingdom is yet to come but is providing social, economic, and political salvation throughout the world. Proponents of this view often reduce Christ to simply a teacher or a prophet and turn the eschatological teachings of the New Testament into imagery of a present social evolution and a coming social bliss. The second view, and certainly the most common, is the dispensational premillennial view. Dispensationalists hold that the terms "Kingdom of God" and "Kingdom of Heaven" (the latter used only in Matthew) describe a present kingdom and a future kingdom, respectively. The focus, however, is on a future, literal, earthly kingdom in which Jesus will reign as an earthly king. The third view is the Reformed view which sees the Kingdom of God as both present and future. At present, "it designates the rule of God established through creation and extending through providence over the universe."<sup>1</sup> In the future, it will be a whole-hearted recognition of all

---

<sup>1</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and new testaments*, (Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust, 1948), 372.

creation to that sovereignty. These three views will be surveyed with attention being given to the light that Scripture sheds on each position.

### **The Liberal Hope View**

The liberal hope view can certainly not be accepted by any serious student of the Bible, let alone anyone who would call themselves an evangelical. Its very premise denies the deity and perfection of Christ. Christ did not possess “Messianic consciousness,” because the order of events was not according to the “outlined plan,” say these proponents. Vos writes of this view, “it shifts the emphasis in His teaching from the present-spiritual to the external-eschatological, making the former no more than a means to the latter...seeing that a man so absorbed by these radical other-worldly, fantastic speculations, could not have possessed a well-balanced psychical temper; He becomes a subject for psychiatric investigation.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus is not only ludicrous, but He is quite an impotent king, if even considered a king by this view at all.

The kingdom, according to the liberal hope view, is not yet arrived. Some liberal theologians, like Albert Schweitzer, held that Jesus expected the Kingdom to arrive in the near future. Therefore, when it didn't, Jesus died “a deluded first century apocalypticist.”<sup>3</sup> This view also sees the Church, not as the Kingdom, since the Kingdom has yet to arrive. Therefore, everything is building, moving toward a future point (the consummation of the Kingdom). That point, however, is not realized now. In the early twentieth century this view was a tool of the Social Gospel in America. In order to accommodate the pressures of Academia, specifically the notion of evolution, liberals saw the movement toward the coming Kingdom as a bettering of mankind. This view of

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 379.

<sup>3</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI : Eerdmans, 1974), 55.

the Kingdom had all the answers to the social, political and economic woes of the day. Furthermore, this progression showed how man was getting better; he was evolving. The final fulfillment of all of this would be the consummation of the Kingdom.

It seems simple enough to identify the problems with this view. The rejection of Christ's deity and perfection of His mission to earth seem reason enough to reject the notion. However, it is important that one understands why this view came into existence. The rationalism of the Enlightenment had grown tantamount in America, and theologians were not going to be left behind. Therefore, rationalism became the standard of liberalism. The supernatural teachings of Jesus had to be explained away or eliminated. Any notion of a spiritual kingdom was not rational and therefore eliminated. The Kingdom could be seen in the future, where it fit rather nicely. Only pragmatic elements of Christ's teaching that could support the social and political agenda of the liberals were taught.<sup>4</sup> The result was that Jesus became only an icon and that God's work in this world was reduced to the occasional good phenomenon.

### **The Dispensational View**

The growth of Dispensationalism can probably be attributed most greatly to Liberalism as to anything else. Dispensationalism grew not because of its minor doctrines, many of which have been rejected by present-day Dispensationalists, but because of its major doctrine of the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. People of the early Twentieth Century embraced Dispensationalism in reaction against Liberalism. And for that reason it is quite possible that other doctrines were not investigated as

---

<sup>4</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, (New Haven, CT : Yale University Press, 1972), 733-804.

closely as needed, as has been evidenced by the abandoning of some doctrines in recent years (e.g. Modern Dispensationalism, Progressive Dispensationalism, etc.).

Traditional Dispensationalism taught that Christ came to establish an earthly kingdom. He came offering this kingdom to the nation of Israel, but they rejected it and therefore God's plan was postponed.<sup>5</sup> Dispensationalists assert that not only did God not yet establish His Kingdom among men; he has two people of His own. They assert that the Church is God's people in the New Testament and the nation of Israel is God's people in the Old Testament. The lines are kept distinct. Israel is not the Church and the Church is not Israel. Furthermore, they draw a distinction between the term "Kingdom of God" and "Kingdom of Heaven." Ladd points out that this begins "from the premise that all Old Testament prophecies to Israel must be fulfilled literally."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the "Kingdom of God", according to Dispensationalists, is the rule of God over all, while the "Kingdom of Heaven" is the earthly rule that Jesus offered but was rejected. It is this kingdom that He will establish on earth, as a literal, earthly monarchy when He returns the time after the next, seven and a half years after the Rapture. Furthermore, the Sermon on the Mount is not prescribed for the present dispensation, but will be the Law for the Kingdom of Heaven in the later dispensation.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, according to Dispensationalists, the Kingdom is yet to come. The Kingdom will be a literal, earthly Kingdom. Christ will rule in an earthly manner. Yet there are problems that arise when this view is examined. First, in Matthew 25:31-46 is written the establishment of the Kingdom. In verse 34 he gives the Kingdom that is the

---

<sup>5</sup> Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly dividing the people of God?*, (Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing, 1995), 110.

<sup>6</sup> Ladd, 57.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

inheritance to the sheep on the right. He separates the sheep on the left and sends them to eternal judgment (v. 41). Yet, according to the Dispensational view, there shall be unbelievers in the Kingdom (see also Rev. 20:7-10 where it speaks of Satan's deception at the end of the Thousand Year Reign.) Their literal method of interpretation cannot render a solution to this. Furthermore, Luke 11:20 and 17:21 state that the Kingdom itself is in the midst. Of course, the response would be that this is the Kingdom of God not the Kingdom of Heaven (which is mentioned only in Matthew and is arguably a synonym of the term "Kingdom of God"). Additionally, Dispensationalists claim that the pearl of great price in Matthew 13:45 is the Church and the field is Israel. However, literal interpretation could not render this result.<sup>8</sup> Additional examples could be provided, but suffice to say that Dispensationalists interpret Scripture literally when it fits their theological framework and they do not when it is not fitting. The only exceptions to this observation are those theological positions of traditional Dispensationalism that have been abandoned by modern-day Dispensationalists recognizing the truth of Scripture. It should also be stated that Dispensationalists make the same accusation against Covenant Theologians regarding the system of theology governing their hermeneutic.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, it was noted that Dispensationlists claim Jesus came to earth to offer His kingdom to the nation of Israel, but that Israel rejected it. But has God ever worked that way? Did He give the Law "hoping" that the nation of Israel would abide by it perfectly and be saved? Did He establish the Jewish monarchy to save the nation politically? Did He send the prophets to give the nation of Israel a "chance" to repent? The answer is

---

<sup>8</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four views*, ed. Robert C. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL : InterVarsity Press, 1977), 105-106.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald M. Johnson, "Covenant Hermeneutics," *Conservative Theological Journal Volume 3* (December 1999) : 328. Tyndale Theological Seminary.

most clearly “NO!” God foreshadowed the salvation he was to bring, that only He could bring, to mankind in greater and greater detail through history. What man could not accomplish through the Law to save himself, Christ could accomplish for all God’s people by perfectly fulfilling it. That which David could never have done, no matter how perfectly he ruled or how willing his subjects were to him, Christ sovereignly and mightily does through His Kingly office. What no prophet could do in the hearts of a stubborn people, Jesus Christ accomplished and the Holy Spirit works to regenerate people’s hearts of stone and turn them into hearts of flesh. Christ’s entrance into the world was to die and thereby establish the Kingdom, not simply offer it as some impotent religious figure. In fact, he did not **offer** His kingdom; He **established** His kingdom, as the sovereign of all!

### **The Reformed View**

The Reformed view of the doctrine of the Kingdom is defined by Vos as, “the rule of God established through creation and extending through providence over the universe.”<sup>10</sup> The Covenantal perspective understands a unity to exist between the Old and New Testaments. God’s Kingdom has always ruled all things. On earth, God revealed His kingdom first through the nation of Israel. However, this was not to be the end as if God’s highest aspirations were merely political. The Jewish monarchy was to point to something greater, namely, the messianic kingship that would one day come to save not the ethnic nation of Israel, but the True Israel, the people of God. The Messiah’s coming brought with it the ushering in of the Kingdom.

Jesus was the founder of no new religion; instead, he was to bring about the realization of what had previously been presented in ideal form. His (Vos’s) point is that there is a historic unity between Jesus’ teaching and

---

<sup>10</sup> Vos, 372.

the revelation of the Old Testament regarding the Kingdom. The essence of the Kingdom of God consists in the supremacy of God, in the sphere of saving power and in the state of human blessedness. There could be, for Jesus, no state of happiness for man without the prior reigning of God.<sup>11</sup>

Yet the Reformed view does not claim that the Kingdom of God is fully manifested. The present time is in the progression of the Kingdom's manifestation. In other words, today can be seen the very making of history, the history of the Kingdom. The Church is the manifestation of God's Kingdom work here on earth. The Church is the New Israel that is prophesied in the Old Testament. In the book of Ezekiel we see that, "Eventually Ezekiel saw a new Israel with Messiah as its prince (34:23f.; 37:24). That new Israel would walk in the law of the Lord (11:20; 16:61; 20:43; 36:27) and dwell in the land of Canaan (36:33; 37:25). God would enter into a new covenant with that people (37:26–28), and he would walk in close fellowship with them (39:29; 46:9). Upon them the Lord would pour out his Holy Spirit (36:27; 39:27)."<sup>12</sup> Unless one insists on a literal occupying of the land of Canaan, all of these things have been fulfilled in the Church. The only thing that would keep Israel and the Church separate is a system of interpretation that insisted on such. The Reformed view, particularly the Amillennial view, asserts that the Church is the New Israel completely and that the Kingdom of God has been taken from Israel and given to a new people, the Church (Matt. 21:43). Of interest is that the term "Kingdom of God" is used in Matthew 21:43, not "Kingdom of Heaven." Is this not specifically speaking of the Messiah's particular kingdom and not of God's general rule over all? This supports the view of the Reformed who hold that both

---

<sup>11</sup> Ransom Lewis Webster, "Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949): A biographical sketch", *Westminster Theological Journal Volume 40* (Spring 1978) : 308. Westminster Theological Seminary.

<sup>12</sup> J.E. Smith, *The Major Prophets*, (Joplin, MO : College Press, 1992).

terms, “Kingdom of God” and “Kingdom of Heaven,” are synonymous (see also Matt. 19:23-24 where both terms are used synonymously).

And so it is that the Kingdom has not only come but it also is to come. As in much prophecy of the Old Testament, there was a present or near fulfillment, and a future fulfillment (e.g. the Messianic Psalms). J.I. Packer writes, “The kingdom is present in its beginnings though future in its fullness; in one sense it is here already, but in the richest sense it is still to come (Luke 11:20; 16:16; 17:21; 22:16, 18, 29-30).”<sup>13</sup> After Jesus’ death and resurrection, he claimed to His disciples, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”<sup>14</sup> The word “all” is exclusive. Jesus is King **now**.

---

<sup>13</sup> J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A guide to historic Christian beliefs*, (Wheaton, IL : Tyndale House, 1993), 194.

<sup>14</sup> *New American Standard Bible : 1995 update*. 1995 (Mt 28:18). LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

### Works Cited

- Ahlstrom, Sydney E. 1972. *A Religious History of the American People*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hoekema, Anthony A. 1977. *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four views*, ed. Robert C. Clouse, Downers Grove, IL : InterVarsity Press.
- Johnson, Ronald M. 1999. "Covenant Hermeneutics," *Conservative Theological Journal Volume 3*. Tyndale Theological Seminary.
- Ladd, George Eldon. 1974. *A Theology of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI : Eerdmans.
- Mathison, Keith A. 1995. *Dispensationalism: Rightly dividing the people of God?*, Phillipsburg, NJ : Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing.
- New American Standard Bible : 1995 update*. 1995. LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.
- Packer, J.I. 1993. *Concise Theology: A guide to historic Christian beliefs*, Wheaton, IL : Tyndale House.
- Smith, J.E. 1992. *The Major Prophets*, Joplin, MO : College Press.
- Vos, Geerhardus. 1948. *Biblical Theology: Old and new testaments*, Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust.
- Webster, Ransom Lewis. 1978. "Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949): A biographical sketch", *Westminster Theological Journal Volume 40*. Westminster Theological Seminary.