

THE NATURE OF THE KINGDOM

by

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It is not my purpose here to set forth in a summary fashion all that the Scriptures have to say on the subject of the Kingdom of God. Rather, I shall concentrate on those aspects which identify the Kingdom as preached by Jesus Christ, with the soteriological purposes of God. The position advanced by dispensationalists — that the Kingdom of God is primarily a Jewish-based Jerusalem-centred earthly kingdom once refused by the Jews but now destined to triumph in full millennial splendour — will be seen as erroneous to the precise extent that the Kingdom is viewed in its true soteriological perspective.

It should be noted that the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus is not to be confused with the eternal, sovereign, and universal Kingdom of God; nor, indeed, is it to be strictly identified with Christ's omni-authority (Mt. 28:18), since all persons fall within the sweep of the latter, but certainly all have not entered the Kingdom of which our Lord speaks in John 3.

The Kingdom of God concerns the restoration of God's explicit reign among a people who have rebelled against Him. Such is the import of Daniel's vision concerning the four savage beasts (Dan. 7), symbols of four nations whose dominion is removed when the Ancient of Days intervenes.¹ It is thus the "gospel of the kingdom" which must "be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations" (Mt. 24:14). The importance of entering the Kingdom is repeatedly stressed, for to remain outside the pale ensures damnation (Mark 9:47). The Kingdom must be entered with the faith and simplicity of a child (Mark 10:14f.). Such things as wealth, which swells the pride of man, easily guarantee exclusion (Mark 10:23-25). As a man approached the truth, our Lord pictured him as approaching the Kingdom of God (Mark

12:34). It was the glad tidings of the Kingdom of God which were preached not only by our Lord and His disciples, but also by the Apostles in the early Church (Luke 8:10; 9:2; Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). In this light, seeking the Kingdom of God is the most important activity in which a man may be engaged (Mt. 6:33; Luke 12:31). A man can neither see nor enter the Kingdom of God without spiritual regeneration (John 3:3, 5). Quite obviously, therefore, the Lord's Kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). Indeed, "the Kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" (Rom. 14:17). Because the Kingdom is soteriological, it is apparent that the unrighteous shall not inherit it (I Cor. 6:9f.; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5). It is therefore incumbent on each believer to make his calling and election sure; "for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly in the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (I Pet. 1:11).

Kittel's now famous *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* notes a variety of synonyms in the New Testament for the concept of the Kingdom of God, and concludes, "From all these synonyms we may see that the concern of the (kingdom) as God's action toward men is soteriological, so that our explanation of it stands or falls with our explanation of soteriology generally in the preaching of Jesus Christ and His apostles" (I, p. 583). In other words, the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus is primarily that particular exercise of Divine sovereignty which is directed toward the defeat of Satan, the salvation of men and their inner renewal so as to make them willingly subservient to the will of God. "It is the action of the sovereign God of heaven by which his reign is restored in power to those areas of his creation which he has permitted in rebellion to move outside the actual acknowledgement of his rule."²

With the Advent of our Lord came the establishment of the Kingdom of God. In a sense, the Kingdom actually came with the Messiah, even though, in a greater sense, it awaited His exaltation; and, for its consummation, awaits His return. But it came in a preliminary way in His Person; for "when He was demanded of the Pharisees, when the Kingdom of God should

¹See G. Elden Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) pp. 81f.

²*Ibid.*, p. 83.

come, he answered them and said, The Kingdom of God cometh not with observation; neither shall they say, Lo, here! or, Lo there! for, behold, the Kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20f.). Quite likely this refers to the Lord’s presence among the people, and should be translated “among you”.³ Is it not written, “The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the Kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it” (Luke 16:16)? It was the first coming of Christ which divided the ages.

It is clear, then, that the Kingdom of God is not solely, nor even primarily, future. There are far too many texts concerning the present aspects of the Kingdom, to permit such a view to be tenable (eg. Rom. 14:17; Col. 1:13; I Thess. 2:12; Mark 4:26ff.; Luke 6:20). Yet, at the same time, there is a sense in which the Kingdom of God is yet future (cf. Luke 19:11ff.; II Tim. 4:1, 18; James 2:5). The Kingdom of God grows, like the stone which smashed into the colossus, and grew to become a great mountain (Dan. 2:32-35). This fact our Lord also stressed, especially in His parables: eg. the mustard seed (Luke 13:18f.), and the leaven (Luke 13:20; Mt. 13:31-33).⁴ The Kingdom is even more futuristic than this, for it shall one day be consummated by the return of the Messiah and the inauguration of the final order, following the great judgment. Therefore, Scripture speaks repeatedly of inheriting the Kingdom, and of the heirs of the Kingdom (eg. Mt. 25:34; I Cor. 6:9; 15:50; James 2:5).

The Kingdom of God, therefore, is essentially moral and spiritual, as opposed to earthly and political. Men were to prepare for it by repentance (Mt. 3:2). It is to be entered by the

³See N. Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT, p. 443, fn.3, for a discussion of the meaning of the phrase, and the divergence in interpretation to which the two views lead. The meaning is ordinarily “within you;” but there are instances in the classics when the meaning must be “among you,” as is most likely here.

⁴Many dispensationalists, on the ground that leaven “always” serves in Scripture as a symbol of evil, exegetically force these passages to teach that leaven in the parable does not represent the Kingdom of God, but the spirit of evil. Anyone who reads the parable will readily see how weak and unnatural such a view is. In any case, “leaven” is used in a “good” sense in at least two other passages of Scripture: Lev. 7:13; 23:17. On this question, cf. O. T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1945), pp. 87f.

new birth (John 3:3, 5), and is not of this world (John 18:36). Since it is both spiritual and soteriological, the Cross is present from the very beginning. John the Baptist introduces the Messiah as the Lamb of God whose purpose was to remove the sin of the world (John 1:29). The prophet Isaiah had predicted that the Servant of Jehovah must suffer and die as the Substitute of sinners; and Jesus early explained that the basis of eternal life was in the lifting up of the Messiah on the cross, as the brazen serpent had been lifted up on a pole in the days of Moses (John 3:14-16). Furthermore, the Kingdom was early declared to be open to others than Jews only; for the lamb of God came not to die for the sins of the Jews, but for the sins of the world. The Samaritan woman was told that the centre of worship was soon no longer to be at Jerusalem (John 4:21-24). And in Christ’s first sermon in His hometown, Nazareth (Luke 4:16ff.), He applied the words of Isaiah 61:1f. to the Gentiles and produced a venomous reaction.

It is thus apparent that the Cross was present in the mind of Christ from the very beginning of His ministry. Some have thought that Christ’s ministry should be viewed along lines such as the following: The young Nazarene Prophet leaves His home full of naive enthusiasm and tries to change the world. His energies are bent to the hope which Judaism’s prophecies had nursed. His program embraced two points in logical sequence; first, national righteousness; and second, national prosperity. He travels as an itinerant preacher from community to community, “offering people this kingdom, and dispensing blessings and cures on every hand, but notably to the poor and sick. At first, the adulation is gratifying, and it appears as if this startling Prophet is going to win astounding success in achieving His goals. Unfortunately, however, the people go for the bounty, but are a little less keen on the righteousness. Political independence, and material prosperity, along with little responsibility and less purity, are the burning desires of the populace. It doesn’t take the people long to see that their Prophet has no intention of moving in that direction; and so His charm dissipates in the frigid blast of malicious reaction. The eyes of Jesus are now forced to move from the theocratic kingdom hope to a wider and spiritual hope. Instead of a throne awaiting Him, there is a Cross; and with sad heart He abandons former goals and bends His efforts to the for-

mation of a separate society called out of Israel, and eventually out of the Gentile world.⁵

But surely the evidence calls for a radically different view of the course of Christ's ministry. His greatest thoughts were with Him from the beginning, and He was identified as the sacrificial lamb from the beginning. He expected a tragic end at the time when He defended His disciples for their neglect of fasting. When the Messiah came, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). Entrance into the Kingdom and entrance into life are equally and pre-eminently important (Mt. 13:44-46; 18:8, 9; Mark 9:43, 45, 47).⁶ The life, like the Kingdom, is both a present experiential reality (John 3:16; I John 5:12) and a future hope (I Tim. 4:8; Rev. 2:7). And certainly the sole basis of our enjoyment of that life is the Cross-work of Jesus Christ, and His resurrection (Col. 3:3, 4; Mt. 20:28; Rom. 5:10; I John 3:16).

What, then, are the conditions for entrance into the Kingdom of God? It is certainly insufficient merely to be a son of Abraham according to the flesh (Mt. 8:11f.). In a sense, the Kingdom must be "taken" violently (Mt. 11:12). The word of the Kingdom must be received and understood (Mt. 13:19). Conversion, with attendant humility of a child, is mandatory (Mt. 18:1, 3, 4; Luke 18:6, 7), and therefore those with riches find it especially difficult to enter into the Kingdom of God (Mark 10:23-25). Poverty of spirit ensures one of the Kingdom (Mt. 5:3); and the new birth is an absolute necessity (John 3:3, 5). The sum and substance of the whole is that repentance and faith are essential conditions for entrance into the Kingdom. The reality of these is supported by resultant obedience, or repudiated by subsequent disobedience. Obedience and faith cannot be dissociated from each other. "He that believeth⁷ on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not (*ie.* he that disobeys)⁸ the Son shall not see life but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36).

⁵See A. B. Bruce, *The Kingdom of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1909) pp. 59-62.

⁶Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 37, writes "that entering the Kingdom and entering into life mean much the same, for the two expressions are used in parallel (Mk. 9:43, 45, 47)."

⁷Grk. *pisteuon*.

⁸Grk. *apeithon*.

There are also a number of passages which specify conditions for entrance into the Kingdom as it will ultimately be constituted. Most notable, perhaps, is I Cor. 15:50: "Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption." A changed body is therefore necessary (vs. 51ff.).

In short, man must be utterly transformed by the grace of God. Having once trusted the Saviour, the regenerated individual must follow the path of obedience of His Lord and Saviour, for it is written that such are to be "as obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: but as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of living;⁹ because it is written, be ye holy, for I am holy" (I Pet. 1:14-16). And this obedience is not to be confused with cheap outward conformity; much more, it must be an inner and all-pervading part of each individual who has entered the Kingdom of God's light. Did not the Master affirm, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt. 5:20)?¹⁰

Having established what is the essential nature of the Kingdom of God, it will be well to consider briefly the ethics, morality, and general teachings of the Kingdom. The largest body of material related to this theme is our Lord's Sermon on the Mount. Some writers suggest that the Sermon is really a body of law which will be enforced during the millennium. Carl F. H. Henry pointed out wryly that any period of time which requires detailed regulations concerning face-slapping scarcely warrants the title "Millennium." Of the Sermon on the Mount, Edersheim writes:

Its great subject is neither righteousness, nor yet the New Law (if such designation be proper in regard to what in no real sense is a law), but that which was innermost and uppermost in the mind of Christ — the Kingdom of God. Notably, the Sermon on the Mount contains not any detailed or systematic doctrinal, nor any ritual teaching, nor yet does it prescribe the form of any outward observances. This marks, at least negatively, a difference in principle from all other teaching. Christ came to found a Kingdom, not a School; to institute a

⁹Grk. *agastrophe*.

¹⁰Cf. R. Zorn, *Church & Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1962) p. 11.

fellowship, not to propound a system. To the first disciples all doctrinal teaching sprang out of fellowship with Him. They saw Him, and therefore believed; they believed, therefore learned the truths connected with Him, and springing out of Him. So to speak, the seed of truth which fell on their hearts was carried thither from the flower of His person and life. . . . It is Christ, then, as the King, who is here, flinging open the gates of His Kingdom. To study it more closely: in the three chapters, under which the Sermon on the Mount is grouped in the first Gospel, the Kingdom of God is presented *successively, progressively, and extensively*.¹¹

Let us survey the range of subjects covered. The beatitudes set forth the character, blessings, and persecution of the ideal subjects of the Kingdom of God (Mt. 5:3-12; Luke 6:20-26). Note the ideological progression. Then, by two aphorisms, the Lord sets forth the mission of the subjects of the Kingdom (Mt. 5:13-16). Our Lord next expounds the fundamental morality of the Kingdom, especially as contrasted with the dicta of the Rabbinical interpretations of the Law (Mt. 5:17-48; Luke 6:27-30, 32-35). Christ declared the teachings of His Kingdom to be the fulfilment (*ie.* the completion)¹² of Mosaic Law. The superiority of the righteousness of the Kingdom of God over that of the Scribes and Pharisees, with their accumulating interpretations, is made readily apparent by the examples given by the Saviour. The source of murder is hatred; the source of adultery is lust; divorce is not to be patterned after the whim of men;¹³ the subjects of the Kingdom are to be so trustworthy and reliable that their lives serve as oaths, rendering verbal oaths profanity; vengeful retaliation is not to be found among subjects of the Kingdom; to be the children of the Father, the Kingdom subjects must even love their enemies, following the example of the Father Himself (Mt. 5:45, 48).

Our Lord proceeds to enumerate a number of ways in which the subjects of the Kingdom are to manifest righteousness, not only with respect to practical religion, nor solely with respect to God

Himself, but also with respect to contemporary society. Giving must entail neither hypocrisy nor pride (Mt. 6:1-6). Prayer must not serve as an excuse for show. The Lord even includes a model prayer to illustrate content, scope, and attitude (Mt. 6:7-13), and stresses the importance of sincere repentance when asking forgiveness of sin from God (Mt. 6:14-15). Fasting, too, has no merit if done for exhibition (Mt. 6:16-18). Goals control a man's life: and the subject of the Kingdom must make righteousness, not material things, his goal (Mt. 6:19-23). Single-hearted devotion to God is required; and such love embraces trust in Him who will provide material necessities (Mt. 6:24-34). The Christian is not to be prejudicial towards others, but rather walk in the fear of the final judgment (7:1ff.). The Lucan account here adds two explanatory metaphors, including the illustration of the blind leading the blind. Matthew records the Lord's attack on the censorious criticism which overlooks self's gross faults while offering to assist others in ridding themselves of their minutiae. On the other hand, holy things are not to be scattered around without discrimination (Mt. 7:6). Continual prayer ensures the petitioner of Divine response (Mt. 7:7-11). In context, this probably has primary reference to attaining wise and discriminating judgment and conduct. The golden rule sums up the attitude prescribed for the subject of the Kingdom: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" (Mt. 7:12).

Shepard¹⁴ points out that the conclusion of the Sermon comprises four exhortations and warnings: (1) Disciples are warned that they must enter into life by the narrow, difficult, and relatively unpopular way, and not follow the cheap and ruinous felicity of the world. (2) Jesus warns them against false teachers (Mt. 7:15-19; Luke 6:43-45). The pragmatic test is the regenerated character which must produce good fruit. (3) Jesus strongly warns against all false personal religion (Mt. 7:21-23). (4) Jesus concludes by declaring that all real successes in life depend on building upon the doctrines set forth in the Sermon (Mt. 7:24-29; Luke 6:47-49).

¹¹Alfred Edersheim, *The Life & Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) Vol. 1, pp. 528f.

¹²Cf. John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Valley Forge: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), pp. 98ff.

¹³Probably the best book to appear in recent years, on the difficult subject of divorce, is by John Murray, *Divorce* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), 122 pp.

¹⁴J. W. Shepard, *The Christ of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), pp. 191-193.

The parables of our Lord, which are in a sense of an incidental character, also shed considerable light on the nature of the Kingdom. Taken together, they form a many-faceted jewel, each parable sparkling a new truth concerning the Kingdom. The parable of the sower teaches that the Word of the Kingdom produces fruit according to the receptivity of the hearers. The tares and the drag-net teach that a mixture of good and evil will continue until the consummation. The pearl of great price and the treasure hidden in a field emphasize that the Kingdom of God is the *summum bonum*. The parable of the blade which matures to the ear and the full corn teaches that the growth of the Kingdom is gradual, slow, and sure. The parables of the talents and the pounds tell of work and wages in the Kingdom of God. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin primarily reflect the joy of finding that which was lost (note especially Luke 15:7, 10). The parables of the lowest seats at feasts, and of the Pharisee and the publican, reveal that the Kingdom of God is reserved for the humble; and also for the hungry, according to the parable of the great supper. The children in the market-place, and the barren fig-tree, demonstrate Christ's impending judgment on His Jewish contemporaries, foreshadowing the moving of the Divine favour from Israel to the Gentiles. And the parable of the wedding feast and the man who attended it without an appropriate robe, speaks of the doom of those who despise the grace of God.

In summary: It is apparent that the Kingdom of God is soteriological, present, and spiritual; that it will one day be consummated, its subjects inheriting its fulness. It is just, gracious, and progressive. There should be small wonder that the one attribute of God which He demands be ours because His, is holiness (I Pet. 1:16; Lev. 11:44): and that the "more excellent way" to be sought by the believer is sacrificial love, which endures into eternity when faith is no longer needed and hope has been realized (I Cor. 12:31-13:13). Berkhof summarizes:

The primary idea of the Kingdom of God in Scripture is that of the rule of God established and acknowledged in the hearts of sinners by the powerful regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit, insuring them of the inestimable blessings of salvation, — a rule that is realized in principle on earth, but will not reach its culmination until the visible and glorious return of Jesus Christ. The present realization of it is spiritual and invisible.¹³

¹³Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 568.