

# The Kingdom of God: Present or Future?

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On the lips of Jesus the term “Kingdom of God” unquestionably summarized the very heart of his Message. “The Kingdom of God is the central theme of the teaching of Jesus, and it involves His whole understanding of His own person and work.”<sup>1</sup>

“In the book of Acts the Kingdom of God was still the general formula for the substance of Christian teaching . . .”<sup>2</sup>

Yet the voluminous discussions of the meaning of the Kingdom of God, the heart of the Gospel preached by Jesus, and therefore the Christian Gospel, continue to leave the impression that the subject is complex in the extreme, indeed that the truth of the matter is virtually beyond recovery. An enormous amount of scholarly effort has gone into analyzing the biblical and non-biblical data in an effort to explain what Jesus taught as his central theme. Can it really be that our New Testament records provide no clear idea of what Christ and the Apostles meant us to understand by the Kingdom of God? Nothing less than the Gospel message of salvation is at stake.

Nearly all writers on this subject agree that the Kingdom has a present and future reference in the teaching of the New Testament. But it is the *present* reference which seems to attract almost all the attention, the impression being given that Jesus insisted on the fact that the Kingdom of God *had arrived* with his ministry. How deeply that notion has been instilled in us can be tested by asking in a variety of religious circles what is understood by the

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Richardson, ed., *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, SCM Press, 1979, 119.

<sup>2</sup> *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. II, 855.

term “Kingdom of God.” Almost invariably the reaction will be that it is a present reality, *a reign of God in the hearts of the believers*, the Kingdom thus being, in some sense, synonymous with the Church. That emphasis might well appear convincing were it not for a large number of impressively simple New Testament passages which flatly contradict the notion that the Kingdom was present, in the sense that the Kingdom itself had *come* with Jesus. Surprisingly these passages seem to have escaped notice, or they register very little, as worthy of investigation. Yet they provide the most obvious support for the fact that the *coming* of the Kingdom is linked overwhelmingly in the New Testament not with the ministry of Jesus in Palestine, but with the Coming of the Messiah in glory at the end of the *age* (popularly, but wrongly, known as the end of the *world*). It is essential, therefore, at the outset to make a fundamental distinction between the *proclamation* of the Good News of the Kingdom, which is at the heart of the ministry of Christ and the Apostles, and the *future coming* of the Kingdom which is consistently associated with his coming in glory at the end of the “present evil age” (Gal. 1:4).

## **I. The Future Kingdom of God**

### **A. The Coming of the Kingdom in the Synoptic Gospels**

Any analysis of the time element in connection with the Kingdom of God should quite naturally concern itself firstly with the New Testament use of the word “come” in reference to the Kingdom of God. Do the New Testament writers consider the *coming* of the Kingdom to have occurred already, or is it expected for the future? Immediately we are struck with the fact that we are to pray continually that the Kingdom should *come* (“Thy Kingdom come,” Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2). Jesus was undoubtedly present when these words were spoken; yet he urges his disciples to pray for the *coming* of the Kingdom! It is thus clear that it had not yet come; and this impression is reinforced by the fact that Jesus, speaking shortly before his death, did not expect to drink again of the wine of the Passover cup *until* the Kingdom had *come* (Luke 22:18). Moreover, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple (Matt. 27:57) and therefore understood the faith, was at the time of the crucifixion still *waiting for the Kingdom to come* (Luke 23:51). Its coming is here quite obviously still in the future. As absolute confirmation of this, we find in Luke 21:31 that it is the cataclysmic future events leading up to the return of Christ in glory which herald also the *coming* of the Kingdom of God: “When you see all these things [warning of the near approach of the return of Christ in glory], know that the Kingdom of God is near” — or, as

the sense is well captured by the Good News Bible, “about to come.” The future coming of Christ in glory is thus decisively linked with the coming of the Kingdom.

We may add to these passages the crucial parable in Luke 19:11ff. in which Jesus describes himself as a nobleman who is to depart to a “far country” (i.e., to the Father in heaven) to receive his authority to rule and then to return as king to establish the Kingdom. This information is given by Christ to correct the misunderstanding that the Kingdom of God was to appear *immediately* (Luke 19:11). According to Jesus, there is no question that it will appear, but not in the immediate future. It is significant that it was Jesus’ being in the vicinity of Jerusalem at the time which prompted the expectation that the Kingdom was about to be manifested publicly. This shows that the Kingdom was understood as being a Messianic government, centered upon Jerusalem, as all the prophets had foreseen. Jesus says nothing, then or after the resurrection, to suggest that their understanding of the Kingdom was fundamentally wrong. It is only the question of the *time* of its arrival which needs to be clarified, and no precise chronological data are offered here or anywhere in the New Testament to allow the setting of dates. Much harm has been done to the New Testament doctrine of the Second Coming by those who succumb to the illusion that the precise time of the Great Event may be known in advance.

The parable in Luke 19 makes two important points: firstly that the Kingdom had not yet appeared, late in the ministry of Christ, and secondly that it will appear when Christ returns from the “far country,” after an unspecified period of absence. It should be quite clear that the evidence of Scripture entirely negates the popular concept that the Kingdom of God had *come* with the ministry of Christ. In every case where the simple verb “come” is used of the Kingdom (with the possible exception of the phrase “come upon” in Matt. 12:28), it is a future coming which is being described. (We leave until later the handful of passages which perhaps imply the Kingdom’s presence in another sense, in the ministry of Christ.)

### **“In the Kingdom”**

We may now fairly examine a group of sayings which describe a situation where people are said to be “in the Kingdom.” Does the New Testament see this state of affairs as present or future? The phrase is first found in Matthew 8:11, where it is said that many *will come* and recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob “*in the Kingdom*,” while others will be cast out. The event being

described is the well-known Messianic banquet, which is to occur at the return of the Lord.

There is a further reference to this celebrated occasion when Jesus states that he will no more drink of the wine of the Passover *until* he drinks it new with the disciples “*in the Kingdom*” (Matt. 26:29; Luke 22:16). It should be noted that in Luke’s account “*in the Kingdom*” is paralleled by “*until the Kingdom comes,*” only two verses later. A further passage gives an equally telling picture of the future Kingdom. James and John request from Jesus prominent positions with him “*in the Kingdom*” (Matt. 20:21). This is patently a request for positions in the future Messianic Rule, and though the petition cannot be granted as requested, Christ confirms the reality of the future Kingdom by stating that the highest positions in it will be assigned to those whom God chooses (Matt. 20:23). In this connection we must refer also to Matthew 19:28 which likewise places the inauguration of the Kingdom of God in the New Age or New World (Moffatt and New International Version). It is then that Christ sits on the throne of his glory, that is, “*when the Son of Man comes in His glory*” (Matt. 25:31), and his authority to govern is shared with the Apostles. At that same time the righteous shall “*shine forth in the Kingdom of their Father*” (Matt. 13:43). A composite version of Matthew’s and Luke’s descriptions of the future Kingdom gives us the clearest possible picture of the Hope which animates the apostolic church:

“I tell you positively,” Jesus replied, “*in the Reborn World, when the Son of Man takes his seat on the throne of state, you, too, shall be seated on twelve thrones, governing the twelve tribes of Israel. You are those who have stayed with me through all my trials, and just as my Father has made a covenant to give me the Kingdom, so do I now covenant with you that you shall eat and drink at my table in my Kingdom; and you shall sit on thrones governing the twelve tribes of Israel*” (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30).

Such a vision of the New Age, the Messianic Era, would have been well understood by those of Jesus’ contemporaries who were familiar with the writings of the prophets, for they had consistently foreseen a coming Golden Age of world peace, to be presided over by the Messianic King.

### **“Entering” and “Inheriting the Kingdom”**

Having established that the coming of the Kingdom is seen as future and is linked with the coming of Christ in glory, and that to be “in the Kingdom” is to have attained to a share in the eschatological Kingdom, we must now examine the frequent use of the words “enter” and “inherit” with reference to the Kingdom. The concept of entry into the Kingdom and inheritance of it is, of course, basic to the whole New Testament. When is this to occur?

We find an unequivocal answer in Matthew 25, where the faithful are invited to enter or inherit the Kingdom “when the Son of Man comes in His Glory and sits on His glorious throne” (v. 31). This is quite evidently in the future. Entry into the Kingdom of God is elsewhere equated with entry into “Life” or “the Life of the Coming Age” (KJV, “eternal life”), to be introduced by Christ at his coming at the end of the present age (Mark 10:30). These passages are definitive for the frequent references to entry into or inheritance of the Kingdom. All refer to the future, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. (In John’s Gospel there is a greater emphasis on the Life of the Age to Come being experienced now, but this does not mean that John did not share with his fellow Apostles the expectation of the future public manifestation of the Kingdom at the return of the Messiah.)

A most important sequence of parallel statements by Matthew equates entry into the Kingdom with “entering Life,” “being saved,” “eating and drinking in the Kingdom” and “judging” (that is, governing) the twelve tribes in the New Age (see Matt. 19:16-29). Here, in every case, the references are to the eschatological salvation to be granted to believers at the return of the Messiah; and among the terms used to describe this salvation *inheritance of the Kingdom of God* is the most prominent, as in a number of other New Testament passages (1 Cor. 6:9, 10; 15:50; Eph. 5:5; Gal. 5:21). The idea of inheriting or entering the Kingdom is derived from the Old Testament promises to Israel of inheriting and entering the promised land of Canaan. The New Testament promises believers that they will “enter” and “inherit” the land of Israel and thus *the Kingdom of God on earth* (Matt. 5:5; Rev. 5:10, etc.). The Hebrew land promise, which is at the basis of the covenant, has become in the New Testament the promise of future entry into the Kingdom of God.

Mark provides in 9:43, 47 a clear definition of the two possible destinies of man. These are to “enter life” or to “go into hell-fire” (9:43). The same may be stated, as Mark reports it, as “to enter the Kingdom of God” or to “be cast into hell-fire” (9:47). This shows beyond doubt that entrance into the Kingdom of God is an event of the future parallel in time with being cast into

hell-fire. There is no verse in Mark's Gospel which suggests that the Kingdom of God is present. Mark introduces us to the Kingdom of God by reporting that Jesus declared it to be "at hand" (Mark 1:14, 15), or "approaching." That this did not mean it was present is clear from two important facts. In Mark 15:43, a prominent disciple is *still* "waiting for the Kingdom of God"! This was after the crucifixion of Jesus. Mark hardly expects us to believe that the Kingdom had come with the ministry of Jesus. The Kingdom of God remains future, even after the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 1:5-7). The expression "the Kingdom of God is approaching" reappears in the parallel phrases "the end is at hand" (1 Pet. 4:7) and "the Lord's return is at hand" (James 5:8). In neither case could this mean that these events had arrived. They are expected in the future, as is the Kingdom of God.

These basic facts take us back to the beginning of the ministry of John the Baptist. He preached the same Gospel as Jesus himself. "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17, 23). John puts before us the two great events on the horizon of his spiritual vision. These are either to be "gathered as wheat into the barn" (i.e. enter the Kingdom) or to be "burned up as chaff with unquenchable fire" (i.e., to go into hell-fire).

The future as Jesus and the New Testament see it offers us a choice of "entering the Kingdom," which is the same as "inheriting" or "entering the Life of the Age to Come," or being "burned up as chaff in hell-fire." The two destinies announced in the Gospel, which is Good News as well as threatening news, are to enter the barn of the Kingdom or the bonfire of destruction.

## **B. The Future Kingdom Outside the Gospels**

If we turn to the evidence outside the Gospels, we find that Paul consistently uses the term Kingdom of God to denote the future reward and objective of the present Christian life. The *Theological Word Book of the Bible*, amongst many other authorities, declares this quite simply: "God's Reign is still to be established," as the future Messianic Reign. Having pointed out that it was in reference to the future Kingdom that Christ bid his disciples pray, "Thy Kingdom come," this authority states: "It is generally in this [future] sense that the expression Kingdom of God is used in the New Testament outside the Gospels, as denoting the Messianic Kingdom which is the reward and goal in heaven of the Christian life here below."<sup>3</sup> Unquestionably, then, the Kingdom of God is first and foremost the *future* Messianic Kingdom, to be established by Christ at his return.

<sup>3</sup> "Kingdom of God," in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, SCM Press.

Our quotation above, however, suggests that the *location* of the Kingdom will be in heaven, i.e., not here on the earth. This popular idea was firmly rejected by Kenneth Leech when he said that to describe the Kingdom of God as “unearthly” is to make nonsense of the entire Jewish-Christian hope for the transformation of the earth — “Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done *on earth* as in heaven.”<sup>4</sup>

As examples of references to the future Kingdom outside the Gospels, we may cite the following:

- Acts 14:22: “It is through much tribulation that we must *enter the Kingdom of God*.” (Note the common New Testament theme of suffering *now*, and inheritance of the Kingdom or reign *then*.)
- James 2:5: We are now “heirs of the Kingdom of God which God has promised to them that love Him” (as often elsewhere in the epistles, heirs *now*, inheritors *then* — Rom. 8; Eph. 1:13, 14).
- 2 Peter 1:11: By developing Christian qualities of character now, “there *will be* supplied to you entrance into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.”
- Revelation 11:15: “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our God” (in a vision of the transfer of power to Jesus at his Second Coming).
- Galatians 5:21: “Those who do such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God.”
- Ephesians 5:5: “No idolater has any inheritance in the Kingdom of God.”
- Hebrews 12:28: “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe.”
- 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10: “Don’t you know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God? . . . Thieves and extortioners . . . will not inherit the Kingdom of God” (parallel to v. 2, which speaks of the saints managing the world).
- 1 Corinthians 15:50: “Flesh and blood *cannot inherit the Kingdom of God*,” i.e., a transformation of our present physical bodies into spiritual bodies is required for the future inheritance of the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>4</sup> London *Times*, November 22, 1980.

This is conclusive for the argument that the Kingdom is primarily future in Paul's thinking. It is impossible for us to inherit the Kingdom at present. This can only happen at the future resurrection. Where Paul speaks of the Kingdom of God as "righteousness and peace in the holy spirit" or "not in word but in power" (Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20), he extends the Kingdom to cover the entire Christian process from conversion until the arrival of the Kingdom. "Kingdom of God" is made virtually a synonym for the Christian faith as a whole.

The Kingdom of God appears in addition under various phrases, "reign with Christ," "glory," "inheritance," "reward," "crown," etc. This is an important point to counteract the popular impression that the Kingdom of God is less emphasized in the epistles.

The passages we have treated above must surely more than justify the interesting statement made by the writer on eschatology in the celebrated *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, distinguished by its sober collation of biblical data. The writer referred to the Synoptics, but his statement remains true for the entire New Testament:

It thus appears that there is nothing in the synoptics antagonistic to the eschatological view of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is *not present* in any sense not reconcilable with the fact that it is *also and mainly future*. No one may understand the Gospels who cannot accept the fact that in a perfectly distinct sense the teaching of Jesus was not modern. It was in the highest degree sane and authoritative, yet it remained true to the traditional view that the Kingdom would come by miracle and catastrophe. Jesus did not dissociate Himself from the traditional view that the end would come in the form of a catastrophic transformation, culminating in the Advent of Messiah Himself, who would come from heaven. He seems rather everywhere both the assumptions and the direct references of his language, to set His seal to this view . . . [He] steadfastly contemplated a *final wonder of destruction and re-construction* which would be the perfect establishment of the Kingdom of God *on earth*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis A. Muirhead, T&T Clark, 1917, Volume I, 530, 531, emphasis added.



A similar conclusion is drawn by another writer in the same dictionary, in a discussion of the coming of the Kingdom. While rightly stating that there is a different sense in which the Kingdom is now present, the writer says:

We are taught by Jesus to think of the Kingdom as yet to come. In the Lord's prayer we have the petition "Thy Kingdom come!" And there are many passages which show that these words refer to a great future realization (Matt. 8:11; 13:41; 25:31; Mk. 8:38; 14:25; Luke 21:31; 22:16; Acts 1:6, 7, etc.). But clearest of these are the parables of growth: the tares, the mustard seed, the leaven, the draw-net, the seed growing in secret. These parables deal with the development of the Kingdom in history and its relation to the world at large. They connect the conception of the Kingdom as a spiritual fact here and now with that conception which is eschatological and regards the Kingdom as a *perfected state of things in the future*. It is plain that our Lord never lost sight of the great final realization of the ideal. He constantly looked at the present in the light of the future, and taught His followers to live and work with the great end in view.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus promised the renewed earth to his followers and Abraham, the father of all the faithful, was expecting to possess Canaan (Heb. 11:8). He never yet inherited the land (Acts 7:5) and must yet rise in the resurrection to do so.

## **II. References to the Kingdom as in Some Sense Present: The Kingdom Anticipated**

It is right that we turn our attention to the handful of important passages which describe the Kingdom of God as in some sense present in the ministry of Christ and the Apostles, or indeed as a present reality for Christians in general. Though these passages are only a few compared with the far more numerous clear references to the future Kingdom of God, they are frequently the only ones quoted in contemporary discussions of the Kingdom. A completely misleading impression of the predominant New Testament view of the nature of the Kingdom may thus be given. The future Kingdom, so widely attested throughout the New Testament and seen as the great future prospect for the believer, is wrongly referred to as the "consummation," when according to the biblical writers its future is really *the beginning* of the manifested worldwide rule of the Messiah on earth.

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<sup>6</sup> Charles F. D'Arcy, "Ideas," Volume I, 775, emphasis added (see Luke 12:37).

The references to the Kingdom as in some sense present in the ministry of Christ must be treated as special cases, and not be allowed to obscure the far greater emphasis on the Kingdom as future. A parallel may be seen in the non-literal resurrection referred to by Paul (Eph. 2:6). This has already happened in the life of the believer at conversion, but it must never be allowed to overshadow or replace the future objective resurrection of the dead in Christ (see 2 Tim. 2:18). That future resurrection is for all the biblical writers the great historical event marking the end of the present age, and ushering in the Age of Messiah.

### **The “Presence” of the Kingdom in Matthew 12:28; Luke 11:20**

Firstly, on a single occasion, Christ is quoted as saying that the Kingdom of God has *come upon* those from whom a demon is exorcised (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20). The Kingdom of Satan had then been defeated in respect of each individual who was thus freed from the shackles of the demonic influence. This is very different in its scope from the universal victory of the Kingdom at the end of the age, though it is certainly, of course, an anticipation of the final triumph. It should be noted, however, that the same phrase “come upon” is found in 1 Thessalonians 2:16, where it appears to mean that those on whom the wrath “has come” are *destined* for the *future* wrath of God. They are candidates for the future vengeance of God, what Paul in the same letter calls “the wrath *to come*” (1 Thess. 1:10). Similarly, to say that the Kingdom has “come upon” an individual may simply mean that when the demon is removed from him he becomes a candidate for the future Kingdom.

Support for this understanding is provided by Moulton and Milligan in their *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*.<sup>7</sup> Evidence from the papyri proves that the parallel statement in 1 Corinthians 10:11, “upon whom the ends of the ages are come” is equivalent to “who are heirs of the revenues of the ages.” To say that the Kingdom of God has “come upon” someone may thus indicate that he is heir to the future Kingdom. It certainly does not mean that the Kingdom of God has arrived as the worldwide theocracy promised so frequently in both Testaments.

### **The Kingdom “Within” or “Among”**

Secondly, Luke alone records an episode in which Jesus may have said that the Kingdom is already “in your midst” (Luke 17:21). To take this single passage to mean that the Kingdom has now fully arrived and has no future

<sup>7</sup> Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, 331.

reality is not only to contradict the rest of the New Testament but to make Luke ludicrously inconsistent; for only a few verses later he is describing the coming of Christ in terms of lightning flashing from east to west, and he later connects this future spectacular and universally visible event with the arrival of the Kingdom of God (Luke 21:31). It is clear that the Kingdom is present among the people in the special sense that the King himself is present, though unrecognized by the Pharisees. There was little point in their looking for a worldwide manifestation of the Kingdom, when they had failed to recognize the King. The translation of the much-investigated word *entos* in verse 21 (within, in the midst, within your grasp) is difficult to determine with certainty, and there remains the possibility, supported by a number of scholars, that the remark of Jesus may refer not to the present but to the future: The Kingdom of God will not appear locally, but will be universal when it comes.

### **Further References to the Kingdom of God as Present**

Thirdly, entry into the Kingdom is spoken of in a single passage as a process beginning *now* (Matt. 23:13). It is well known that the great events of the future must be anticipated now by the individual believer. The future Kingdom confronts each of us when we first hear the Good News of the Reign of God. In this sense the Christian must embark now, in this life, upon the business of preparing for entry into the Kingdom at the end. The process of entering begins in the present life.

In the same vein Paul states, on one occasion only, in Colossians 1:13, that we have been transferred into the Kingdom of God, by being rescued from the Satanic Kingdom of darkness. Such a transfer is an anticipation of the future entry into the Kingdom. It should be carefully noted that he does not say that we have already *inherited* the Kingdom. In the same letter he describes the inheritance as something yet to be received (3:24). Elsewhere he states categorically that “flesh and blood,” i.e., human beings in their present physical state, “cannot inherit the Kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 15:50). He also connects the coming of the Kingdom with the future “appearing” of Christ in glory (2 Tim. 4:1); and this is his final statement on this central teaching.

It will be appropriate to include at this point the remarks of the distinguished Jewish historian, Dr. Hugh Schonfield, who spent a lifetime researching the origins of Christianity and is well qualified to comment on the way in which the New Testament term Kingdom of God has often been divorced from its original Messianic context.

Christians have very mixed-up notions of what is meant by the Kingdom of God. The prevailing opinion is that it is a state or condition which the believer experiences, both individually and in the corporate life of the Church as the body of Christ. Here Christ's reign is realized. But in only one passage in the Gospels — and there by a mistranslation of the Greek text — is the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven represented as something internal. Yet so enthusiastic has the Church been to evade the consequences of regarding Jesus as the Messiah that it has singled out as of special merit the words “the Kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). Everywhere else in the Synoptic Gospels, in Luke as in Matthew and Mark, the Kingdom of God is a state of affairs on earth, the coming of which is to be prayed for, which Jews should seek after, strive to be worthy of and thus be able to enter into and which is described as near at hand. *It is equated with the time when the Messianic Age will commence.*<sup>8</sup>

If students and expositors of Scripture are to relay the central New Testament doctrine of the Gospel about the Kingdom of God, it is clear that a fundamental change of emphasis is required. The writer had an opportunity to inquire of an English vicar what part the doctrine of the Second Coming played in his preaching. The reply was “none at all.” The clergyman then volunteered the information that he particularly dreaded the season of Advent in the church calendar, because he knew that he was expected to preach on the coming of Christ!

### **III. The Kingdom to Come at the Second Coming of Jesus**

The Kingdom of God is primarily associated with the Second Coming of Christ, the Day of the Lord. It is the grand goal and objective of the Christian life now. The fact that we hear so little about the return of Christ is a measure of how little we care for his Kingdom. If broadcast sermons can be taken as typical, it appears that the whole eschatological hope of entry into the Kingdom of God at the return of Christ has been abandoned. This can mean nothing less than that the heart and essence of Christianity has been discarded. For the New Testament is founded upon Christ and his Gospel Message of the Kingdom, and that Kingdom is itself the basis of the great Hope that Christ will return to establish it. It is first and foremost, as we have

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<sup>8</sup> *For Christ's Sake*, London: MacDonald & Jane's, 1975, 68, emphasis added.

seen, a Kingdom of the future (even allowing for the fact that, particularly in the Gospel of John, the “Life” of the future age can be embarked on now).

It will be no answer to say that preaching should concern itself primarily with the virtues of faith and love; for Paul makes it quite clear that the development of those qualities is predicated upon first grasping *the hope of the future goal*. In Colossians 1:4, 5 he speaks of “your faith . . . and love . . . [built on] the Hope reserved for you.” *It is essential that the Hope be defined* if it is to be effective as a stimulus to faith and love. Hope is everywhere in the New Testament directed towards the return of Christ and the future Kingdom. As Alan Richardson says: “Hope is through and through eschatological, always bearing reference to the return of the Lord Jesus at the end of the age.”<sup>9</sup> The Hope upon which everything depends is the conviction that the glorious Kingdom will be manifested at the return of the Messiah. We should note in passing that New Testament Hope is never directed to the moment of the individual’s death, but always to the Parousia.

For the early Christians, and equally for us if we can only believe, the New Testament holds out the Hope of participation in the Messianic Reign when it comes. Astonishingly, this information makes little impact on contemporary churchgoers, for they have been taught to think of a goal to be obtained by each believer at the moment of death, and in a location far removed from the earth. It seems rarely to occur to readers of Scripture that such thinking represents a radical departure from the view of the early Christians, who expected to inherit *the earth* (Matt. 5:5).

The *earth*, renewed and restored under the government of the Messiah, was to be their Kingdom of Heaven (i.e., a kingdom of divine origin to arrive from heaven). Had not Abraham, the father of the New Testament faithful, been promised the *world* as his inheritance (Rom. 4:13)? Had he not sojourned in a land which he was later to possess, though he received not a “square yard” of it during his lifetime (Acts 7:5; Heb. 11:8ff.)? In promising the *earth* to the disciples, Jesus was only confirming what had been the hope of the faithful for thousands of years (see Ps. 37). These biblical facts are beyond question, and no one need go further than a local bookstore to confirm them. The *Pelican Commentary* on Matthew, by J.C. Fenton, gives us a simple definition of the meaning of the Kingdom of Heaven: “Jesus promises the disciples the Kingdom of heaven — that is the greatest possession of all, *to reign over the earth when God begins to rule . . . to be set over the earth* as rulers under God (cp. Matt. 25:21, 23: ‘I will set you

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<sup>9</sup> *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, 109.

over much’).” The disciples will be comforted by God “when His Kingdom comes and His will is done (6:10).”<sup>10</sup>

Commenting on the Christian reward “in Heaven,” Fenton says: “‘in Heaven’ means *not that they will go to heaven* (an idea which is seldom found in the New Testament), but ‘with God.’”<sup>11</sup>

Let the reader search the pages of the New Testament. He will find no promise of a reward in a location “beyond the skies.” The distinguished New Testament scholar J.A.T. Robinson states the truth when he says: “In the Bible, heaven is nowhere the destination of the dying.”<sup>12</sup> A similar assertion is made by Robert Girdlestone: “We rarely read that the godly will go to heaven, either at death or at the resurrection. We are rather told of a Kingdom being set up *on earth*, of a heavenly city descending from above, and taking up its abode in the new or renewed earth.”<sup>13</sup>

Returning to the *Pelican Commentary* on Matthew, we find that in the Lord’s prayer, “the disciples are taught to pray first for the coming of the Age to Come; compare the Aramaic prayer in 1 Cor. 16:22: ‘Our Lord come,’ and Rev. 22:20: ‘Come, Lord Jesus!’”<sup>14</sup> Matthew has more to say about this future Kingdom in chapter 19, verse 28. Fenton explains that the New Age (KJV “regeneration”) refers to “the Kingdom as the time when everything will be made new, born again because God’s will will be done on earth (6:10). . . . Christ comes to rule.”<sup>15</sup> The disciples “will share in His Dominion over the New Age.”<sup>16</sup> They will take part in the renewal of the world, and the re-education of mankind.

These passages and many others in the New Testament define the Hope which lies at the center of the Lord’s prayer: “Thy Kingdom come!” The Kingdom for which we are to pray is nothing less than a state of affairs on earth where God’s will will be fully accomplished. The disciples are to be instrumental in administering that Divine Rule with Christ, thus using their divinely conferred authority as co-rulers in the Messianic Kingdom to render the greatest possible service. Nowhere, however, does the New Testament suggest that this ideal state of affairs will be achieved apart from the return of Christ. The prayer for the Kingdom is thus in reality a prayer for the return of the Messiah who will inaugurate the Divine Reign. This is the

<sup>10</sup> London: Pelican, 1963.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 83, emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup> *In the End God*, Fontana Books, 1968, 105.

<sup>13</sup> *Synonyms of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973, 267.

<sup>14</sup> Fenton, 101.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

central theme of apostolic Christianity: “Don’t you know that the Saints will rule the world?” (1 Cor. 6:2). “If we endure with Him, we will also reign as Kings with Him” (2 Tim. 2:12). The Church will “reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:10).

The reign of the Messiah over a renewed earth is, after all, the glorious hope expressed by all the Old Testament prophets, and eagerly awaited by the Apostles as the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21). This hope Jesus came to confirm (Rom. 15:8). In this connection, Professor T.F. Glasson’s remark in his recent publication *Jesus and the End of the World* is of utmost significance:

Prophet and psalmist had depicted an era of peace and justice in which men would beat their swords into ploughshares. *Christianity has no right to abandon these visions of the future*: Isa. 2, 11; Ps. 72, and many others of a similar type. *To say that these will be fulfilled in heaven is to abandon them*. Heaven is already a realm of peace and love. To attach the Messianic promises to heaven is virtually to discard them.<sup>17</sup>

“Abandon,” “discard” the promise of an era of peace and justice?! Have we, like so many previous generations, failed to heed the message of the prophets, the servants and spokesmen of God? This is exactly the point made by Kenneth Leech, quoted earlier. He charges the churches with having made “a nonsense of the entire Jewish-Christian hope for the transformation of the earth — ‘Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done *on earth*.’” Will no one rise in indignation at such wholesale defection from the prophets’ vision?

#### **IV. A Loss of Hope and Vision**

The process by which the Church originally lost its hope for the future began when the expected Second Coming did not occur immediately. Instead of persisting in the faith that the promises of Christ would ultimately find their accomplishment in the return of the Lord Jesus to establish the Kingdom, the Church retreated behind a quite different hope of its own invention (with help from alien Greek philosophy), that of attaining at the moment of death to a heavenly Kingdom “beyond the skies.” This hope has nothing whatsoever to do with the biblical promise of the Messianic Kingdom on earth, and its acceptance as being the hope actually taught by Christ and the Apostles has caused untold confusion.

<sup>17</sup> Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1980, 129, emphasis added.

The false hope was “safe” in the sense that there is no way in which its fulfillment can be verified or challenged. But it was disastrous, not only as being a distortion of the apostolic message about the coming Kingdom, but also because it has robbed the churches of any real answer to the forces of unbelief whose goal it is indeed to conquer the world. Worst of all it practically denies the Messiahship of Jesus who, according to the popular notion, never actually comes to earth as the Messiah, the ultimate occupant of the throne of David (Luke 1:32, 33), to bring about the restoration of all things, which is the major theme of all Old Testament prophecy (Acts 1:6; 3:21).

Lamentable also has been the Church’s subsequent attempt to bend the teachings of the New Testament to fit its own version of the goal and purpose of Christianity. For the New Testament is largely incomprehensible when read with the presupposition that a Christian is to “go to heaven” as a disembodied soul when he dies. The biblical view is that he is to rise from the sleep of death at the resurrection (Dan. 12:2) and rule in the Kingdom of God when Christ comes (Rev. 5:10). The two systems cannot be harmonized. We must accept one or the other. It is the age-old choice between the faith once delivered to the saints and the traditions of men. We would do well to ponder the perceptive words of a distinguished Church of England theologian who pointed out that from the second century the Greek and Roman mind, instead of the Hebrew mind, came to dominate the Church’s outlook: “From that disaster the Church has never recovered, either in doctrine or in practice.”<sup>18</sup>

It is for the individual believer, seeing the scandal of our departure from apostolic Christianity, to strive to recapture the Hebrew mind which dominated the original faith. This can only be achieved by paying close attention to the New Testament, and laying aside the traditions which have made such nonsense of the apostolic writings.

## V. Summarizing the Data

It will be useful to provide a complete survey of the New Testament use of the term Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven), allowing the facts to show the prominence which the biblical writers give to the Kingdom as the *future* reign of Christ.

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<sup>18</sup> Canon Goudge, “The Calling of the Jews,” in collected essays on *Judaism and Christianity*, Shears & Sons, 1939; quoted by H.J. Schonfield, *Politics of God*, 98, 99.



The following passages in the Gospels refer to the *coming* of the Kingdom, as being the great event of the future. Included are the references to Christ “coming in the Kingdom” (i.e., coming to inaugurate the Kingdom). This same climax of history was seen in a visionary “preview” at the transfiguration:

Matthew 6:10, 13: the coming Kingdom associated with power and glory; cp. Mark 10:37, “Kingdom” = “Glory.”

Matthew 24:30: the coming of Christ in power and glory to establish the Kingdom. Matthew 16:28; Mark 9:1; 11:10 (“the coming Kingdom”); Luke 9:27; 11:2; 21:31; 22:18, 30; 23:42, 43 (Kingdom equated with future paradise).

The following verses describe the saints as being “*in the Kingdom*,” but not until Christ comes: Matthew 5:19 (associated with entry into the Kingdom, v. 20); 8:11; 11:11; 13:43 (the Kingdom at the end of the age); 26:29; Mark 14:25 (parallel to “that day”); Luke 7:28; 13:28, 29; 14:15; 22:16.

The following speak of “*entering*” or “*inheriting*” the Kingdom and are associated with gaining salvation in the future: Matthew 5:20; 7:21; 18:3; 19:23, 24; 21:31; 25:34; Mark 9:47; 10:15, 23, 24, 25; Luke 18:17, 24, 25.

The following equate the Kingdom with the *future goal and reward* of the Christian life: Matthew 5:3, 10 (“Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven” = “inherit the earth”); 6:33 (“Seek first the Kingdom”); Luke 6:20-23 (“Yours is the Kingdom of God,” parallel to “you shall be filled,” “you shall laugh,” “rejoice in that day”); 9:62 (“fit for the Kingdom of God”); 12:31.

The following refer to the *future Kingdom* as the activity of Christ as ruler with his saints: Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30.

The following describe a “*waiting for the Kingdom*” after the ministry of Christ is complete: Mark 15:43; Luke 23:51 (“waiting for the consolation of Israel,” Luke 2:25 = “looking for the redemption of Jerusalem,” Luke 2:38 = “waiting for the *Kingdom of God*,” Luke 23:51).

In addition to these specific references to the Kingdom, there are many passages referring to the Kingdom under different, but associated terms — “life,” “glory,” “salvation,” “hope,” “inheritance,” “life of the coming age” (KJV “eternal life”): Matthew 5:5; 18:8; 19:17, 25, 28 (“regeneration” = “new age”); 21:43; 22:2 (“wedding feast”); 25:31, 46; Mark 9:43; 10:30; 13:26; Luke 18:30.

Luke 19:11 shows that it was a mistake to expect, during Christ’s ministry, the immediate appearance of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is to be

associated with the “return” (v. 12), “until I come” (v. 13), and “coming back having received the Kingdom” (v. 15).

The following describe the Kingdom as “at hand”: Matthew 3:2 (John the Baptist places the gathering of the wheat into the barn at the same time as the destruction of the wicked); 4:17; 10:7; Mark 1:15. Those who wish to emphasize the presence of the Kingdom of God may claim that these passages refer to the ministry of Christ in Palestine. But it is far from certain that this is so. In any case, these passages are far outnumbered by the unambiguous references to the Kingdom as future.

The following passages speak of the Kingdom as, in a different sense, a *present* reality: Matthew 11:12 (being taken by violence); 12:28 (the Kingdom has come upon you); 23:14 (entry must begin now); Luke 10:11 (the Kingdom has drawn near to you, i.e., in the preaching of their message by its representatives); 17:21 (the Kingdom is amongst you); Mark 10:15 and Luke 18:17 (receive the Kingdom, i.e. accept the message); Luke 16:16 (the Kingdom is being preached); Matthew 19:12 (renunciation of marriage for the sake of the Kingdom).

In Acts and the epistles the Kingdom remains the central subject of the preaching of the Gospel, with the addition, following the resurrection, of the “name of Jesus Christ.” The full description of the apostolic preaching is thus “*The good news of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ*” (Acts 8:12), but this is abbreviated throughout the New Testament to “the message [KJV “the word”] of the Kingdom” (Matt. 13:19); “the message of God” (Luke 8:11); or simply “the message” (Mark 4:15). Another term is “the truth” (see also 1 Thess. 1:8; 2:13; Eph. 1:13). A sparing use of the words “Kingdom of God” or “reign of God” is understandable, since the mention of a Kingdom too explicitly had serious political implications to which a sensitive Caesar might react unfavorably.

The Kingdom is discussed at length by the risen Christ and his Apostles (Acts 1:3). It is the center of interest in the apostolic circle. This is proved by the all-important question put by the Apostles to Jesus as to the time of the restoration of the Kingdom (Acts 1:6). This timing, however, was not to be revealed. Yet there was no question that it *will* ultimately be restored (Acts 3:21). (Restoration was the appropriate term, since the Kingdom of God had existed in a provisional form under David, the ancestor of Jesus, 2 Chronicles 13:8.) Jesus was ultimately to sit on the throne of David, according to the prophecies (Acts 2:30), and as announced by an angel (Luke 1:32). It is absolutely clear that the restoration was a future event, quite distinct from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which was to occur in the

(then) immediate future, “not many days hence” (Acts 1:5). The message of the good news of the Kingdom (appearing as “the message,” KJV “the word”) is the constant theme of the apostolic preaching and can be traced through the book of Acts, along with the other central theme of the resurrection of Jesus (8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). The Message is still about a future Kingdom, as is shown by Paul’s important statement that “it is through much tribulation that we must enter into the Kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

In the epistles, the Kingdom is likewise the future reward and goal of the faithful church (1 Cor. 6:9, 10; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5). Christians have been invited into it (1 Thess. 2:12), and must now walk in a manner befitting their high calling (1 Thess. 2:12). The reign of the saints is constantly thought of as future: “The saints *will rule* the world” (1 Cor. 6:2). The comments in the *International Critical Commentary* are important for that verse, showing that “rule” is the proper sense, not merely “pronounce judgment on.” (Moffatt translates this “govern the world.”) The future rule of the saints is paralleled a few verses later by the statement that “the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9, 10). This confirms what we have found throughout the Gospels: the reward of the faithful is rulership with Christ in the Kingdom of the coming age. It will also explain the apostolic insistence upon the central importance of that “future inhabited earth of which we speak” (Heb. 2:5, NASB margin).

An examination of Luke 22 will show that the appointment of the Apostles to rule in the Kingdom is the very essence of the new covenant, ratified by the blood of the Lord (Luke 22:20). The Greek word meaning “covenant” (v. 20) is found in its verbal form as “appoint” (v. 29). The connection is unmistakable, and shows that the early Christians thought of themselves as the community of the Messianic reign, those appointed to rule with Christ in the Kingdom: “If we endure with Him, we will reign with Him” (2 Tim. 2:12); “if we suffer with Him, we will reign with Him” (Rom. 8:17). Here, as in Mark 10:37 and Matthew 20:21, we find “glory” and “glorification” parallel to Kingdom and reign. We will therefore be able to understand the frequent references to the future manifestation of the glory of Christ as alternative descriptions of the future manifestation of his Kingdom. We may also compare the expression “riches of glory” in Ephesians 1:18, which is yet another circumlocution for the Kingdom which is the inheritance of the saints (cp. the German word “reich,” for “rich,” and “Reichtum,” for “kingdom”). In one of Paul’s final statements the Kingdom is again associated with the “appearing” (that is, the coming) of Christ (2 Tim. 4:1).

It may be felt that Paul sees the Kingdom as in some way present when he says that the Kingdom of God is “not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the spirit” (Rom. 14:17). Here the term Kingdom of God refers to the whole process of Christian salvation; the present life of the church should reflect the life which will be granted in full measure when the Kingdom is finally manifested at the Second Coming.

Finally, in the book of Revelation the reign of the saints is future: as the community of the new Israel, “kings and priests to our God” (Rev. 1:6), “they [the faithful] shall rule on earth” (5:10). “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” at the coming of the Messiah in glory (Rev. 11:15) and this arrival (Rev. 19:6-21) inaugurates the millennial Kingdom (Rev. 20). The treatment which this passage continues to suffer, at the hands of those for whom the prospect of the reign of Christ and the saints is apparently unacceptable, is evidence of the widespread rejection in church circles of the central apostolic hope for the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. The surprise and indignation which prompted Paul to question the ignorance of the Corinthians — “Do you not know that the saints will rule the world?” deserves a serious hearing among contemporary believers. In a dark world, nothing could be more calculated to inspire hope and endurance than the prospect of the return of Christ to inaugurate a golden era of peace and justice; yet where shall we find that hope being proclaimed?

The statistical evidence of the New Testament occurrences of the term Kingdom of God points unquestionably to the fact that the Kingdom is essentially the grand event of the coming Messianic age. As Thayer stated: “But far more frequently [than references to its presence] the Kingdom of Heaven is spoken of as a future blessing.”<sup>19</sup> Our survey of Kingdom texts suggests that there are about seven times more clear references to the Kingdom as *future* in the New Testament than those which might be taken as evidence of its presence in the ministry of Christ and the Church.

The Kingdom is the substance of the hope which is to sustain the believer in the present life of trial and suffering, in preparation for the life of the coming age. Lest any doubt should remain in the reader’s mind, a simple observation will confirm our thesis. The “inheritance” which Christians are to possess is *everywhere in the New Testament said to be still in the future*. The faithful are now “heirs,” *not yet* “inheritors” (James 2:5; 1 Cor. 15:50). “What is this inheritance?” asks the *Theological Word Book of the Bible*.

<sup>19</sup> *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975, 97.

“‘Kingdom of God,’ ‘the earth,’ ‘eternal life,’ ‘salvation’ . . . ‘Kingdom of God’ is the most characteristic description of the Inheritance.”<sup>20</sup> If the inheritance is future, and designated as the Kingdom of God, then beyond all question the Kingdom is primarily and essentially in the future, as the manifestation of the reign of Christ and his saints on earth. This is the great hope of all the Hebrew prophets, confirmed by Jesus Christ (Rom. 15:8) as the heart of the Gospel of the Kingdom. Since the faith is founded on the words of Jesus (1 Tim. 6:3), the Church should be busy with the proclamation of the Kingdom (Matt. 24:14).

## VI. The Historical Shift of Focus from the Future Kingdom

The loss of the Kingdom of God as the future goal of believers can be traced to a failure of believers to take seriously the foundation of the Gospel as introduced by John the Baptist and Jesus himself. Ridderbos comments rightly:

Jesus thus aligned Himself completely with John [the Baptist; see Matt. 3:2]. Like him He proclaimed the coming of the kingdom, the imminence of the great Day of the Lord, which meant judgment for the wicked and salvation for those who served God.

The coming of the kingdom is nothing less than God’s final, decisive intervention into world history . . . Jesus therefore only said that the Kingdom was *near*. With His appearance the end of the world [age] had indeed drawn near, but it had not yet arrived. The nearness of the kingdom was thus not merely Jesus’ distinctive message at the beginning of His ministry; it remained the content of His preaching to the very end (see [Matthew] 10:7; Luke 22:18). Just like John, He always pointed toward the future.<sup>21</sup>

The loss of a clear vision of the future coming of the Messianic Kingdom of Hebrew prophecy, which was the heart of Jesus’ and the Apostles’ Gospel, is traceable to the disastrous effects of the invasion of alien Greek philosophy which imposed itself upon and confused the teachings of the New Testament church. The 11<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, in its classic article on “Christianity,” reports:

<sup>20</sup> 113.

<sup>21</sup> H.N. Ridderbos, *Commentary on Matthew*, Regency Reference Library, 1987, 76, emphasis original.

Like all concepts the meaning of religious terms is changed with a changing experience and a changing world-view. Transplanted into the Greek world-view, inevitably the Christian teaching was modified — indeed *transformed* [but Jude would hardly have approved this transformation, when he pleaded for “the faith once and for all delivered”]. Questions which had never been asked came into the foreground and the *Jewish presuppositions tended to disappear*. Especially were the Messianic hopes *forgotten* [the New Testament emphasizes again and again the need for a clear grasp of the content of Christian hope] or transferred to a transcendent sphere beyond death [the Platonic notion that disembodied souls survive death in full consciousness]. When the empire became [nominally] Christian in the fourth century, the notion of a Kingdom of Christ on earth to be introduced by a great struggle [the glorious return of the Messiah in power] all but disappeared, remaining only as the faith of obscure groups. Immortality — the philosophical conception — took the place of the resurrection of the body. Nevertheless, the latter continues because of its presence in the primary sources, but it is no longer a determining factor, since its presupposition — the Messianic Kingdom on earth — has been obscured. As thus the background is changed from Jewish to Greek, so are the fundamental religious conceptions . . . [The result of the changes which came over the original faith was a new mould of thought.] These moulds of thought are those of Greek philosophy, and into these were run the Jewish [biblical] teachings. We have thus a peculiar combination — the religious doctrines of the Bible [as culminating in the person of Jesus] run through the forms of an alien philosophy.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>G.W. Knox, D.D., LL.D., professor of philosophy and the history of religion, Union Theological Seminary, New York, Vol. 6, 284, emphasis added.