

Kingdom Theology in the Synoptic Gospels: Towards a Socio-Political Ethic

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I. INTRODUCTION: A THEOLOGY OF THE KINGDOM AND THE ADVENTIST TRADITION

Two themes common to segments of the Adventist tradition are: (1) The world is totally evil and beyond reform, being hopelessly under the power of Satan. Thus it is sinful for Christians to participate in the world's political process; to do so is to consort with the powers of evil. Christians must therefore be apolitical, separated from the world and its social and political concerns. (2) Humankind is facing divine judgment at Christ's second advent when the evil structures of this world and all its supporters will be eliminated by God. God will then usher in His everlasting kingdom, wherein sin, death, and the forces of evil will be no more. Though the details vary considerably from group to group, the basic framework described is common to many (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses, Church of God General Conference, *et al.*).

Such groups, however, rarely, if ever, remain completely apolitical. Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, though professedly strict neutrals, have done more to effect change in American and Canadian law than any other religious group.¹ To me, this means that humans are intrinsically socio-political beings, inescapably enmeshed in the complex web of

¹See M. James Penton, *Apocalypse Delayed: The Story of Jehovah's Witnesses*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985, 127-56 and William Kaplan, *State and Salvation: The Jehovah's Witnesses and Their Fight for Civil Rights*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989.

societal and cultural structures. I believe, however, that there is a valid dimension to the Adventist rejection of worldly politics. But what they have failed to discern is that Jesus offers a profoundly different social and political stance. The Synoptic portrait of Jesus in fact shows him to be preeminently involved in the social and political concerns of his time. Yet Jesus' political vision is not dominated by worldly categories, but by the ethics of the kingdom.

I therefore intend to pursue a specific kind of reading of the Synoptic Gospels to construct a theology of the kingdom. It will be an essentially political reading of the Gospel materials in which I want to recover and revise the Adventist themes just described. First, I will try to preserve the separatist motif found in the Adventist tradition while altering it: Jesus did promote a political vision aimed at effecting systemic change in his culture, but his kingdom vision was diametrically opposed to prevailing worldly norms. It is this tension that led him to the cross. Second, I will integrate the Adventist emphasis on the eschaton. The eschatological coming of the kingdom of God is a pervasive theme in the Synoptic Gospels. The eschaton is the victory of God's kingdom over the structures of evil. Jesus' resurrection is its surety. Rather than encouraging quietism, the eschaton, when seen in light of Christ's ministry and resurrection, is the impetus for kingdom work.

A final word of explanation is in order. I am pursuing this particular reading of the Synoptic materials, not as the only way or best way to approach them, but as *one way* of appropriating these materials. For this reason, for brevity, and for the sake of focusing the discussion, I will not interact with other approaches. For example, the soteriological significance of the cross will not figure into my discussion. This is not because I do not concur with this view, but because it does not play a part in the theological exercise in which I am engaging. At this point it is also proper to mention that besides the Gospels themselves other influences for my approach include Marcus Borg, Gunther Bornkamm, and John Howard Yoder.²

²Although my views differ in significant ways, this article has been particularly influenced by the following works: M. Borg, *Jesus — A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship*, New York: HarperCollins, 1987; G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1960; J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972.

II. TOWARD A TENTATIVE DEFINITION OF THE KINGDOM

There are two dimensions to the kingdom of God in the Synoptic Gospels that I will try to emphasize in my inquiry.

The kingdom of God is the reign of God; as such the kingdom radically impacts the present aeon. Through his ministry Jesus assaults the forces of evil.³ Christ plunders Satan's "property"⁴ by proclaiming the kingdom, expelling demons, healing the sick, and by challenging and overturning oppressive societal mores.⁵ Jesus teaches that the kingdom comes near to those who embrace and live out its ethics.⁶ Those who choose to do so, however, are few.⁷ In fact, even many of the heirs of the kingdom ultimately will be rejected, their place at the Messianic banquet given to others.⁸

The kingdom is also the *domain of God*⁹ — the "age to come" which God will bring about through a cosmic conflagration that will efface the world of all evil.¹⁰

These definitions to some degree overlap, for especially in the ministry of Jesus the kingdom of God is present.¹¹ The kingdom is therefore a tensive symbol: In a sense people can enter the kingdom of God now, yet Jesus also envisions entrance into the kingdom eschatologically. People only finally enter the kingdom after facing judgment by the Son of Man.¹²

³ Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20.

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

⁵ Matt. 4:17, 23; 9:35-38; 12:22-29; Mark 1:40-2:12, 23-28; 3:1-5.

⁶ Mark 10:17-22; 12:28-34.

⁷ Matt. 7:13, 14, 20-22.

⁸ Matt. 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24; cf. Luke 13:6-9.

⁹ I admit to having some difficulty with this concept; it seems to imply that God's kingdom can be identified with some geographical location. Yet if Jesus and the Gospel authors were influenced by Hebrew Scripture prophetic traditions — which they undoubtedly were — it is possible that they may have foreseen a time when God would reign from Israel and from there bless all the nations of the earth (cf. Isa. 2:2-4; 11:1-9; 66:13-24). This is perhaps hinted at in Matt. 19:28 and Luke 22:23-30. In other texts, the eschatological kingdom seems to be described in terms of the eschatological communion of the redeemed (Matt. 8:10ff.; 22:1ff.; Luke 13:28ff.; 14:15ff.). For a view that rejects spatial notions of the kingdom see Roy Harrisville, "In Search of the Meaning of the 'Reign of God,'" *Interpretation*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (April 1993), 140-51. Nevertheless, the reading I am following in this article is that Christ's advent will lead to cosmic regeneration. Thus God's kingdom only comes fully when all things in heaven and earth are in harmony with God.

¹⁰ Matt. 19:28, 29; 24:29-44 and parallels.

¹¹ Mark 1:14, 15; Luke 17:20, 21.

¹² Mark 8:38 and parallels; Matt. 12:36, 37; 25:31-46.

I will conclude this section with two observations. (1) In Matthean thought, entrance into the kingdom is entrance into life. This can be seen from Matthew's depiction of the final judgment. The enthroned "Son of Man" invites those blessed by his Father to "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34). These persons are later said to be those who inherit "eternal life" (Matt. 25:46). (2) The phrase "the kingdom prepared for you from the *foundation of the world*" (απὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου) is striking. Matthew seems to imply that the kingdom is the destiny of the righteous from eternity.¹³ He employs this phrase (and the noun καταβολῆ) only one other time in his Gospel. At Matthew 13:35, in the midst of Christ's kingdom parables, Matthew comments that Christ used parables to proclaim things "hidden from the *foundation of the world*."¹⁴ The position of this text in Matthew's narrative may be important because many scholars believe Matthew structured his material so that Jesus' kingdom parables (Matt. 13) would be the apex of his account. God's eternal kingdom purposes are therefore only now being revealed in Jesus' mission. According to Jesus' parables in Matthew 13, the kingdom's development in the present aeon is subtle rather than violent and the kingdom achieves ultimate victory only at the eschaton, when the Son of Man acts to weed out the "children of the evil one."

III. JESUS AND THE KINGDOM

Jesus' programmatic speech at Luke 4:16-21 highlights the political significance of his earthly ministry. While Luke more than any other Gospel author emphasizes Jesus' concern for the poor and outcast, this

¹³ The phrase might also be paraphrased "from the creation of the world." However, according to the *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, at "Matt. 25.34 . . . it refers to a divine decision that took place at the *absolute beginning*, so that its meaning comes close to that of πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου [as at Jn. 17.24 and Eph. 1:4]" (emphasis in the original. H. Balz and G. Schneider, eds., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, Vol. 2, 255-56). Theologically Matt. 25:34 may therefore refer not to a decision God made after the completion of creation, but to a decision Matthew believed God made as an absolute basis for creation — hence as part of His eternal purpose for humankind.

¹⁴ There are both interpretive and textual difficulties with the reading ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου at Matt. 13:35. For a discussion see Donald Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelein, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984, Vol. 8, 320-24.

theme pervades all the Synoptic Gospels, and indeed even John's Gospel.¹⁵ Thus the scholarly criterion of multiple attestation supports the idea that this motif in the Synoptics represents an authentic reminiscence about the historical Jesus. As such, an examination of Jesus' political stance provides orientation for Christian action in the present.

It is possible that the Synoptic authors, indeed the traditions they inherited, viewed Jesus' baptism as his coronation as king of God's kingdom. For in each account Jesus is anointed and pronounced God's Son.¹⁶ Therefore, with his baptism Jesus embarks on his Messianic mission. First, he is tempted by the Devil, a point I shall come back to in the next section. After successfully completing his wilderness encounter with Satan, he begins his public ministry.

Empowered by the Spirit,¹⁷ Jesus brings "good news to the poor." The fundamental meaning of this message is that God sides with those who cannot help themselves. This is particularly clear in the Lukan Beatitudes, in which those blessed are the poor, the hungry, and the mourning.¹⁸ It is precisely with such ones that Jesus identifies and it is to these that he ministers.

Jesus teaches the people, heals the sick and demonized, and feeds the hungry crowds.¹⁹ Thus Christ ministers to the needs of the whole person. It is noteworthy that in the Matthean summaries of Christ's work, Christ's healing ministry is closely connected with his kingdom proclamation.²⁰ Jesus' mission is therefore a sign of the kingdom.²¹

Jesus breaks boundaries. His concern for the suffering leads him to reject cultural and religious conventions. He touches and heals a leper.²² He heals the son of a despised centurion.²³ He has close association with women.²⁴ He heals on the Sabbath.²⁵ He associates freely with tax collectors and sinners — the oppressors and the oppressed.²⁶

¹⁵ Cf. John 4:7ff.; 5:1-5; 6:1ff.; 9:1 ff.

¹⁶ Mark 1:9-11 and parallels; cf. 2 Sam. 5:1-5; 7:12-16.

¹⁷ Luke 4:1, 18.

¹⁸ Luke 6:20-26; cf. also Luke 1:46-55.

¹⁹ Mark 5:1ff.; 6:30-44.

²⁰ Matt. 4:23-25; 9:35-38.

²¹ Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20.

²² Matt. 8:1-4.

²³ Matt. 8:5-13.

²⁴ Luke 7:36-50; 8:1-3; 10:38-42; Mark 14:3-9.

²⁵ Mark 3:1-5; Luke 13:10-17.

²⁶ Mark 2:13-17.

Yet Jesus does not provide the intellectual framework for a violent revolution. The ethic he expounds is far more radical. Christ challenges his listeners — the poor — to eschew retribution and instead to live by the kingdom ethic he incarnates: concern for the helpless, non-retaliation, love of enemies, and a fidelity to God that transcends the Mosaic law.²⁷ He does not, however, thereby encourage passivity or quietism. Jesus himself opposes and struggles against elements within his contemporary political and religious situation that dehumanize and oppress people.²⁸

Jesus' parables enunciate the same principles. As Craig Blomberg points out:

... most of the shock value of individual parables comes from their positive acceptance of the outcasts of Israel's society. God sides with the poor (Lk 16:19-31), the widow (Lk 18:1-8), the tax collector (Lk 18:9-14) and the prostitute (Lk 7:41-43) against the religious elite who think they can safely neglect such categories of individuals.²⁹

Jesus' parables also contain a note of impending judgment. I have not taken up this theme in this section until now because Jesus saw his ministry primarily as a time of blessing. That is likely why in the Nazareth synagogue he did not continue with the next clause in the Isaianic reading, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor *and the day of vengeance of our God.*"³⁰ John the Baptist had expected the immediate onset of eschatological judgment,³¹ but Jesus envisioned a different course for his ministry. Now was a time of joy and healing, not judgment.³² Nevertheless, judgment remained on the horizon of Jesus' ministry; it echoed in his parables: the tenants, the religious leaders of Israel had wickedly discharged their responsibilities.³³ Thus Jesus warned the Jewish religious authorities, "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people [εθνος, lit., "nation," not λαος, "people"] who will produce

²⁷ Luke 14:12-14; Matt. 5:17-20, 38-48; 7:12.

²⁸ Mark 2:23-28; 7:1-23; Luke 11:37-53; 19:45-47.

²⁹ Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1989, 306.

³⁰ Cp. Luke 4:18, 19 with Isa. 61:1, 2.

³¹ Matt. 3:7-12; Luke 3:7-17.

³² Mark 2:18-20; Matt. 11:2-6.

³³ Matt. 21:33-42.

its fruit” (Matt. 21:43, NASV). These ones would not be allowed into God’s Messianic banquet.³⁴ Temporal and eschatological judgment awaited them.³⁵

Jesus knew he would not succeed in bringing about complete systemic change. He said, “you always have the poor with you . . . but you will not always have me” (Mark 14:7). Indeed, the “Bridegroom” would be “taken away” from the disciples (Mark 2:20).

IV. THE KINGDOM AND THE KINGDOMS

The Synoptic Gospels all record Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness prior to his ministry. The Devil’s offer of the kingdoms of the world to Jesus in Matthew and Luke is my concern here, for it is central to my reading of Christ’s ministry and his political stance.³⁶

We can bracket the question of whether Satan really had the authority to give all the kingdoms of the world to Jesus. There is, however, a strand of thought running through the NT reflected in these passages that views the world as fundamentally under the power of Satan.³⁷ That issue is of importance here. As we have seen, Jesus proclaimed and incarnated a new social and political ethic. To accept Satan’s offer would therefore involve Jesus in and compel him to live according to the ethics and mechanisms that dominate the world under Satan’s control. Jesus ministered precisely to those persons most affected by such demonic mechanisms. Jesus was not opposed to social-political order in itself. As a youth he subjected himself to his parents.³⁸ During his ministry he paid the taxes demanded of him.³⁹ His practice was to teach in the synagogues;⁴⁰ and he had great respect for the Law and the temple — even calling for obedience to the scribes and Pharisees as those who “sit on Moses’ seat.”⁴¹ What Jesus rejected and opposed were the dehumanizing, authority-driven,

violence-oriented mechanisms of his society. The Gospels certainly portray Jesus as having opportunity to employ such means, but in every case he ultimately renounced them.⁴²

Jesus’ Messianic mission — his kingdom proclamation and strident opposition to oppressive social and political structures — brought him into direct conflict with the worldly authorities. The Jewish religious leaders rejected Jesus’ kingdom vision.⁴³ They viewed him as a subversive who threatened the established order. Indeed, Jesus’ prophetic denunciation of the Jewish priestly aristocracy was indirectly an attack on Rome.⁴⁴ Therefore, Jesus knew that in a world dominated by the “power of darkness” his prophetic ministry was fated to be rejected by the established order.⁴⁵ Jesus could thus say, “It is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside Jerusalem.”⁴⁶

The worldly powers of Jesus’ place and time conspired to rid themselves of a dangerous political radical. Jesus’ Messianic mission, his proclamation and incarnation of the ethics of the kingdom, led to his crucifixion.

V. CONCLUSION: THE RESURRECTION, THE COMING KINGDOM, AND THE KINGDOM COMMUNITY

The Gospels do not portray Jesus’ fate as a surprise to him. Two themes continually surfaced in his teaching to the disciples. (1) Jesus recognized that he would be finally rejected and put to death by the authorities of his time. But this would not be his end; Jesus would rise from the dead.⁴⁷ (2) Jesus taught his disciples that the kingdom of God was going to come in power. Large sections of the Synoptic Gospels are devoted to this theme; I do not believe we can fully understand Jesus’ teaching without recog-

³⁴ Matt. 22:1-14.

³⁵ Luke 13:1-9, 22-30; 19:41-44; Matt. 21:44; 23:37-42.

³⁶ Matt. 4:8-10; Luke 4:5-8.

³⁷ John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:1-3; 6:12; 1 John 5:19; Rev. 12:9.

³⁸ Luke 2:51.

³⁹ Matt. 17:24-27.

⁴⁰ Mark 1:21; Luke 4:16.

⁴¹ Matt. 5:17-20; Matt. 23:16-21; 23:1-3.

⁴² Cf. Matt. 21:1-17 and parallels; Matt. 26:47-56; cf. John 6:15.

⁴³ Cf. Mark 10:32, 33.

⁴⁴ John 11:47-50.

⁴⁵ Luke 22:53.

⁴⁶ Luke 13:33; 11:45-52; Matt. 23:27-38.

⁴⁷ Mark 8:31; 9:30-32; 10:32-34 and parallels.

⁴⁸ Mark 8:38-9:1 and parallels; Mark 13; Luke 17:22-37; Luke 21; Matt. 24-25. The themes of Jesus’ resurrection and his second advent are closely related. For a discussion of how early Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus affected its apocalyptic eschatology see I. Howard Marshall, “Is Apocalyptic the Mother of Christian Theology?” *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament: Essays in*

nizing this point.⁴⁸ We can leave aside the question of whether Jesus expected the imminent arrival of the kingdom, or whether “imminent” meant something to first-century people that we moderns are unable to grasp.⁴⁹ What is important is that Jesus believed the coming of the kingdom would fulfill what he inaugurated in his mission.

I will now conclude by briefly exploring these themes and their significance to the ongoing life and work of the kingdom community.

The resurrection was Jesus’ vindication. Through it defeat was swallowed up by victory.⁵⁰ And this was not only a victory for Jesus, it was also a victory for those who had put faith in Jesus and followed his kingdom vision — the community he founded during his earthly sojourn. The resurrection demonstrated that nothing the powers of evil can do could thwart the mission of Jesus’ kingdom community.⁵¹ The victorious resurrected Lord would be with them, empowering them by the Holy Spirit to proclaim and embody the message about Jesus and his kingdom “until the end of the age.”⁵²

As this last Matthean text shows, the disciples would pursue their mission under the shadow of the second advent — the powerful coming of the kingdom of God to vanquish decisively the powers of evil. Jesus had parabolically foretold that the kingdom would develop from its seemingly insignificant beginnings to the ends of the earth.⁵³ But kingdom work in this age will never lead to victory. The kingdom community pursues its mission in the face of continual opposition.⁵⁴ The way of discipleship will always be, as in the case of Jesus, the way of the cross.⁵⁵ In this world dominated by the forces of evil, final victory will come only at the eschaton. The kingdom community therefore grounds its kingdom mission in the hope of Christ’s second advent. Jesus’ vindication through resurrection provides the basis for assurance in the eschatological coming of the kingdom of God: “[God] has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts

Honor of E. Earl Ellis, ed. G. F. Hawthorne and O. Betz, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, 33-41.

⁴⁹ Matt. 10:23; 16:28; 24:34.

⁵⁰ Luke 24:25-27; Acts 2:22-36 *et al.*

⁵¹ Acts 4:23-31.

⁵² Luke 24:44-49; Matt. 28:18-20.

⁵³ Matt. 13:24-33; Mark 4:26-29.

⁵⁴ Matt. 10:16-22.

⁵⁵ Matt. 10:34-38.

17:31).

But what does the expansion of the kingdom mean? Is it identical to the expansion of the Church? No, not necessarily. At times the Church is equally guilty of seeking to impede the spread of the kingdom as the first-century Jewish religious authorities were. The kingdom therefore exists and grows wherever Jesus’ kingdom vision is incarnated. What Jesus envisioned and embodied was an alternative social-political reality, and he founded and instructed a community to live out his vision.⁵⁶ This was not a vision of Christian triumphalism. As we have seen, it was precisely such structures Jesus eschewed. Rather than domination, Jesus incarnated a life of service — the way of the cross:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.⁵⁷

The expansion of the kingdom in the present aeon therefore means actualizing the kingdom ethic and life of Jesus Christ.

Jesus’ parables of the faithful and unfaithful slave, the ten bridesmaids, and the talents, rather than encouraging apathy and passivity, encourage activity in the Lord’s service — the kingdom mission in which he engaged — during the time between the advents.⁵⁸ Indeed, Jesus’ parables teach that the coming of the kingdom is both a beacon and a warning to those who profess to be part of the kingdom of God: A beacon to those incarnating the kingdom life of Christ and a warning to the passive and apathetic.

No matter how many setbacks the kingdom community may encounter in this present age, the resurrection and second advent are the assurance that God’s eternal kingdom purpose for the world will come to pass. Thus the kingdom community embodies the life Christ lived — proclaiming the kingdom, living its ethic, ministering to the helpless, and opposing dehumanizing, authority-centered, violence-oriented structures — with faith in God’s will to incarnate the kingdom in the present and with full

⁵⁶ Mark 3:13-19.

⁵⁷ Matt. 20:25-28; Luke 22:24-27; Mark 9:33-37.

⁵⁸ Matt. 24:45-25:30.

confidence in the future triumph of the kingdom.

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.*
Matthew 6:9, 10