

EDITORIAL

“Heaven” or the Kingdom

It is a serious error to hold that the Kingdom of God plays no important role in apostolic Christianity. Such a view both lacks historical perspective and is at variance with the entire thought of the literature of apostolic Christianity. The very name of the new movement, *Christianity*, would suggest the contrary opinion. So far from the eschatological Kingdom of God being a secondary element in the early church, *it is its great conditioning belief*. The preaching of the first evangelists was not a call to ethical ideals or an argument as to certain truths. Rather it was the proclamation of a Message As regards the Person of the Messiah, there is, of course, no question that the early church believed that Jesus was the Christ who had returned to heaven, whence he would come to introduce the new age and the new Kingdom. This was the very core of the entire Christian movement.¹

These words of the distinguished professor of Systematic Theology at Chicago Seminary protest the persistent tendency of commentators to rid the New Testament of its concentration on the future coming of Messiah to inaugurate a new era of history by introducing the Kingdom of God.

In the New Testament the eschatological Kingdom is indeed the “great conditioning belief.” Both John the Baptist and Jesus announce a Gospel which commands belief in the coming Kingdom of God. Faith is directed not only to a Savior who dies and rises, but to the divine intention to bring present human governments to an end and replace them with the Kingdom of the Messiah, to be introduced by a spectacular intervention.

It is characteristic of much exegesis that the future apocalyptic element in the teaching of Christ is reduced or eliminated. It has been argued that this element cannot go back to Jesus himself, but is the result of a misunderstanding on the part of those who heard Jesus preach. This theory, of course, would involve us all in a guessing game about what Jesus actually taught. If it were true that Jesus’ own teaching has been obscured by the misleading reports of his followers, then the genuine faith of Jesus must remain forever irrecoverable.

¹ Shailer Mathews, *The Messianic Hope in the New Testament*, University of Chicago Press, 1905, 144, 145.

If, however, God has ensured a faithful account of the ministry of the chosen Messiah, then it is obvious that Jesus operated within a well-defined Messianic, apocalyptic framework in which the Kingdom of God was none other than the promised Day of the Lord at which a remnant of Israel would be saved, and the faithful of all the ages would be resurrected from the sleep of death to take up their assigned role as sovereigns with the Messiah in the divine government on a renewed earth.

Read in this light the New Testament is a coherent document with a two-fold underlying purpose — to announce that Jesus is the Messiah and that the Kingdom of God is coming with the return of Jesus to complete his Messianic work.

Traditional orthodoxy cannot face this “Jewish” system without collapsing its strong, eschatological emphasis. Paul, with hope for the future Kingdom burning in his heart, comforts the believers in Thessalonica with the promise that at the Messiah’s arrival, the Christians who have died will be brought to life and with their surviving brothers in Christ they will ascend to meet Christ in the air. Following that stupendous event they will escort the distinguished Messiah to the earth for the inauguration of his reign in the new age. According to Paul, it is *by this process* that believers may expect to come into the personal presence of the Lord: “*Thus* [by means of rapture and resurrection] we shall be always with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17).

Paul’s firm grasp of the future uniting of believers with their Lord has proven too difficult for unmessianic versions of the faith. They have insisted that one can be “with the Lord” by an entirely different process — simply by dying and going immediately and individually into the presence of the Lord in heaven. Paul’s “*thus* we shall come to be always with the Lord because of his future arrival” has been deformed into “thus we shall come into his presence without the need for the future resurrection of the faithful and the spectacular arrival of Jesus in power.”

The two systems are quite different. Commentators are left in a muddle. On the one hand the documents to be explained place their entire emphasis on the future resurrection as the only means by which a believer can meet Christ personally. On the other hand tradition demands that believers not have to wait until the Parousia in order to come face to face with the Lord. The two systems are irreconcilable. John Stott, as a leading evangelical, leaves us with an unresolved problem: how to reconcile the 1662 Burial Service with the teaching of Paul. “For one of the most popular gravestone inscriptions is the text ‘with Christ, which is far better’ . . . ‘Almighty God,’ went the collect of the old 1662 Burial Service, ‘*with whom* do live the

spirits of them that depart hence in the Lord and with whom the souls of the faithful . . . are in joy and felicity.’ A popular hymn confirms the traditional teaching: ‘By death I shall escape from death and life eternal gain.’”²

But this popular teaching has abandoned Paul. Missing from the collect and the hymn is the ringing clarity of Paul’s faith in the eschatological resurrection of the dead which will happen, not at death, but when Jesus *comes back*. Orthodoxy successfully contradicts Paul by making the believer’s arrival “with Christ” a matter of his going (individually) to him, rather than Christ’s *coming back to us*. “Let not your hearts be troubled . . . I go to prepare a place for you . . . I will *come again* [the Parousia] and will take you *to myself*” (John 14:1-3).

In complete harmony with Jesus 1 Thessalonians 4 announces the uniting of the believers with Christ only by the event of the second coming of Christ: “*Thus we shall be with the Lord forever.*” It is to throw the New Testament and Paul into confusion if we then read Philippians 1:23, “My desire is to depart and be *with Christ*,” to mean that individually at the instant of death the believer can enter the presence of Christ. Equally unsatisfactory is the assumption that Jesus’ promise to the thief guaranteed an immediate presence with Christ on the day of the crucifixion. What Jesus in fact offered harmonizes perfectly with Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, a reuniting with Jesus in the future day of the Kingdom-Paradise: “Truly I tell you today, you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). It is a promise for the future.

The loss of a clear vision of the future Kingdom and the resurrection plagues the exegetical enterprise. The Christian hope is to be “with the Lord.” Paul was faithfully following his master when he asserted that coming into Messiah’s presence forever depends on the future arrival of Jesus to raise the dead. “*Thus we shall be with the Lord*,” and by no other means. “Father, I desire that they also . . . may be *with me* . . . I go to prepare a place for you and I will *come again* and will take you *to myself*, that where I am you may be also.”

“Why would you want to go to *heaven*?” it is appropriate to ask the traditional believer. Jesus will not be there, following the future resurrection and the second coming. He is coming back to the earth so that we can be “with him.” To be “with Jesus” will mean inheriting *the earth* (Matt. 5:5) and ruling *on earth* with him (Rev. 5:10).

None of this would appear controversial, had the church not lost sight of the Messianic Kingdom, the heart of Jesus’ Gospel.

² *Understanding Christ*, Zondervan, 1979, 85.