

Seeking the Kingdom of God within the Church of Jesus Christ

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by David Schrock

Is the kingdom of God present or future? Is it now or not yet? Could it in any way be both? If so, how? These are important questions for anyone who has read the Bible, and this Sunday, they will play a large part in rightly understanding how Daniel 2 applies today. In preparation for that sermon, here are a few reflections on the Kingdom of God and the Church.

In evangelical circles, the question of God's Kingdom has been answered for the last half-century with a view called "[inaugurated eschatology](#)." This view affirms Christ's present royal position as seated at God's right hand (Psalm 110), even as he rules the church by way of his Spirit (Matthew 28:20; John 16:7; Ephesians 1:21–23). At the same time, his kingdom has not been yet consummated, and the people who have believed the good news of the kingdom await the day when he will return to establish his rule on the earth.

Among the many names who have advocated this position, few are more important than George Eldon Ladd, the late New Testament professor from Fuller Seminary. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, his books on the kingdom of God engaged Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology alike. And in each, he provided a rich biblical exposition on the subject.

Ladd maintained that the kingdom of God is found in Christ's reign more than the location of his rule (i.e., his realm).[1] He understood the kingdom as a future reality, but one that had broken into the present. Against a view of the kingdom of God as spiritualized in the individual—a view based on a poor translation of Luke 17:21 ("the kingdom of God is within you," KJV; rather than "the kingdom of God is in the midst of you," ESV)—Ladd centered the presence of Christ's kingdom in the church, without confusing the church with the kingdom. In this way, Ladd opposed both the replacement theology of Covenant Theology and the radical division of God's people (Israel vs. Church) in some forms of Dispensationalism.

Today, Ladd's work remains invaluable for students of eschatology. Indeed, those who are unfamiliar with him or inaugurated eschatology, in general, are missing some of the best exegetical research on the kingdom of God for the last two generations. While certainly fallible---as Ladd's [biography](#) shows---his studies have been a major catalyst in evangelical theology.

In what follows, I will offer a summary of five points from a chapter entitled "The Kingdom and the Church" in his [A Theology of the New Testament](#). [2]. In these five points, he shows how the Kingdom of God does and does not relate to the Church of Jesus Christ. As we consider the kingdom of God throughout the book of Daniel, these basic points of theology can help us from going astray from Christ and God's plan to unify all things in him (Eph. 1:10).

The Kingdom and the Church

(1) The Church is not the Kingdom

In the Gospels, the disciples were never equated with the kingdom. It is unhelpful to base such a reading on Matthew 16:18–19, which assigns the keys of the kingdom to the church, but does not equate the two. While Reformed theologians like Geerhardus Vos equated church and kingdom and spoke of the kingdom as an internal reality, he missed the metaphorical language. The same can be said of Jesus's parable of weeds (Matt. 13:36–43). As verse 38 indicates, Jesus clearly teaches that the world is the field, not the church. Moreover, Christian apostles and missionaries proclaimed the Gospel *of the kingdom*, not the gospel *of the church*. In a sentence, then, the *Church is the people of the coming Kingdom*, the citizens of heaven. Local churches, therefore, live out their calling as embassies or outposts of King Jesus. There is certainly a connection between God's kingdom and the Church, but until Christ brings visible reign to the earth, it is best to see the Church as royal heirs who are awaiting the kingdom.

(2) The King(dom) Creates the Church

The rule of God, proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ calls men and women to fellowship in God's kingdom. While the Word and the Spirit alone create faith, we should not suppose that the preaching of the gospel ever produces a totally pure church—i.e., a local church who contains only believing sheep and not unbelieving goats. Following Jesus in Matthew 13, Ladd is clear on this: the church brings in good fish and bad. Nevertheless, in the proclamation of the gospel, local churches are formed. And faithful churches are those who recognize believers through baptism and exercise discipline on unbelievers. Both of these actions are assigned by Jesus to constitute local churches with members who are born of the Spirit and not just the flesh.

(3) The Church Witnesses to the Kingdom

Speaking specifically, the church cannot "build" or "become" the kingdom; rather it "bears witness" to God's kingdom (Acts 1:8; 26:16). Hence, the primary activity of the church is defending the truth of the gospel (1 Tim 3:15) and declaring its contents (2 Corinthians 5:21). In this context, Ladd explains how the gospel of the kingdom must be proclaimed to all the nations.

While growing out of Jewish soil, the gospel is for all peoples. The seventy emissaries sent out in Luke 10 evidence the fact that God seeks to gather men and women for his kingdom among all peoples—seventy is the number of nations in Genesis 10. Thus, the church will be established among all nations, and once established a multi-national people will bear witness to the king and his kingdom (see Revelation 5 and 7).

The Church not only bears witness to the kingdom through its proclamation, it also bears witness in its character. Jesus's Sermon on the Mount calls for disciples to live lives that model the ethics of the kingdom. In demonstrating mercy, meekness, and forgiveness, the world beholds the love of God's kingdom. Thus while inhabiting an age of hostility and oppression, the church is a community of forgiveness, humility, and peace-making.

(4) The Church is the Instrument of the Kingdom

In addition to proclaiming the gospel, the Church also functions as a means of healing and restoration. While Ladd is not as clear on this point, it means at least that in the age of the apostles, Christ gave his messengers the power to cast out demons, heal the sick, and

perform miracles. This continued in Acts, and in some ways the power of God continues today, in that miracles of conversion and healing, not healers, continue.

Likewise, the church functions as an aggregate of believers who are salt and light in the world. In these ways, the blessedness of the kingdom is transmitted into the present age, but only in ways that tell of the coming kingdom. The church does not convert this age to the coming Spiritual age. Rather, in the present age churches are communities of hope and healing which foreshadow the kingdom to come.

(5) The Church is the Custodian of the Kingdom

Ladd contrasts the church with Israel. Under the old covenant, Israel functioned as the elected custodian of God's kingdom. However, in Christ, the people chosen to steward the keys of the kingdom are the people of the Church—comprised of Jews *and* Gentiles. Ladd shows how this develops in the Gospels themselves. As Jesus says in Matthew 21:43–44, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." This verse records the way that the kingdom has been taken away from Israel and given to a people bearing fruit. From the teaching of Jesus (see John 15), the fruit-bearing people are those who receive the gospel---the Jew first and then all nations (cf. Romans 1:16–17).

This is similar to Old Testament Israel, who functioned as the custodian to saving knowledge (cf. 1 Timothy 3:14–16). Sadly, the teachers of the Law failed to lead people to saving faith (Matthew 23:13). Thus, God chose a new people—a remnant from Israel and Gentiles too—to be his appointed custodians of salvation. Interestingly, in Mark 10:17--31 (the story of the Rich Young Ruler), we find Jesus speaking of the kingdom, salvation, and eternal life as three synonymous realities. Thus, those who receive Christ's salvation are guaranteed eternal life; and such eternal life is the present experience of the coming kingdom.

Ladd continues to explain the content of the church's custodianship. At minimum, the Church's stewardship consists of declaring salvation and judgment according to the gospel. This is what Matthew 16:18–20 and 18:15–20 describe as binding and loosing. In baptism, the church publicly declares that a man or woman has been forgiven by God (cf. John 20:23). Likewise, in church discipline the church is declaring the judgment of Christ's royal law. The Lord's Supper, too, is officiated by the church, where the congregation—as a royal assembly of priests—admits to the table those who have identified with Jesus and walk in his ways. As custodians of the kingdom, the church has the royal authority to bind and loose on earth what the king in heaven has already declared.

The Great Commission Bridges the Two Phases of the Kingdom

In these five ways, Ladd provides a very concrete explanation of the way God's kingdom operates in the world today. Wherever the gospel of the kingdom is present, there exists a covenant community that reflects the power, values, and life of the age to come. Salvation means eternal life in King Jesus. In this way, inaugurated eschatology is not abstract or theoretical. It is, instead, as tangible as our communion bread and wine and as visible as our Sunday services of worship.

May we who proclaim the gospel remember that we are proclaiming that Christ's future kingdom has broken into the present, and that all who place their faith in Jesus will experience the presence of the king today, even as they await the coming of his kingdom. Accordingly,

may we avoid the twin errors of believing we can build Christ's kingdom in this age or that Christ's kingly rule is absent from his people today. As Matthew reminds us in the closing words of his royal gospel,

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.
And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
-- Matthew 28:18—20 --

For his Glory and your joy,

Pastor David

[1]George Eldon Ladd, [*A Theology of the New Testament*](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 60–61.

[2]Ibid., 103–117.