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# The Kingdom of God in the Twentieth-Century Discussion and the Light of Scripture

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*The theme of the Kingdom of God is enjoying something of a revival in theology and preaching, but there are still some unresolved basic issues surrounding it. Mr Buzzard, an Oxford graduate, teaches at Oregon Bible College in Illinois and here takes up a theme that has fascinated him for some time.*

The importance of the Kingdom of God for our grasp of Biblical Christianity can hardly be overemphasized. There is an impressive consensus among scholars (rare, perhaps, in the field of New Testament studies!) that the Kingdom of God forms the very heart of all that Jesus taught. Confirmation of the centrality of the Kingdom in Jesus' ministry appears everywhere. When Archibald Robinson presented the Bampton Lectures in 1901, he remarked that

There can be no question that in our Lord's teaching the Kingdom of God is the representative and all-embracing summary of his distinctive message . . . . Throughout His message is 'the Good News of the Kingdom'.<sup>1</sup>

Robert O'Toole notes that for Luke, in both his volumes, 'preaching about the Kingdom of God sums up the ministry of Jesus, the apostles, disciples and Paul.'<sup>2</sup> The Kingdom is the major concern, then, of the whole New Testament. It provides the principal subject-matter of the Gospel.

The fact that Jesus cannot be divorced from the Kingdom of God, that 'extracting this concept from Jesus' life would be like blasting away the foundation of a skyscraper'<sup>3</sup> has not led to a corresponding agreement about the meaning which Jesus attached

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<sup>1</sup> *Regnum Dei: Eight Lectures on the Kingdom of God in the History of Christian Thought* (London: Methuen and Co., 1901), 8, 9.

<sup>2</sup> *The Kingdom of God in 20th Century Interpretation*, Wendell Willis, ed. (Hendrickson, 1987), 153 (Hereafter abbreviated to "20th Cent.").

<sup>3</sup> D. B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Herald Press, 1978), 23.

to the phrase Kingdom of God. 'Competent people have been unable to reach a consensus for over a century'<sup>4</sup> about Jesus' understanding of the Kingdom. This would appear to raise a question about our understanding of the Christian faith as a whole. Can we claim to know the mind of Jesus with any clarity if we confess doubt about the meaning of his core concept?

This essay attempts a brief survey of the discussion about the Kingdom of God since Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer disturbed the status quo in Kingdom theology. Its purpose is also to pinpoint the underlying cause of confusion over the meaning of the Kingdom, tracing the problem to the anti-eschatological bias held by so many commentators.

The publication of Johannes Weiss' (1863–1914) *Die Predigt Jesu vom Reiche Gottes* (1892) marked a major shift to the understanding, almost entirely absent in the prevailing social-liberal articulation of the Kingdom represented by Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), that Jesus' teaching was marked by a strong apocalyptic tone. The Kingdom of God was definitely not, Weiss claimed, to be read as an individualistic experience of the rule of God in one's heart. The Kingdom was by contrast radically future, as an event which would usher in a new order. The Kingdom of God is not to be equated with ethical conduct. Instead, the ethics of Jesus are to be seen as demands upon the followers of Jesus who hope to enter the Kingdom when it comes. The Kingdom will not come into being gradually by growth or development, but only as a result of a cataclysmic divine intervention at the Parousia. Albert Schweitzer independently reached the same general conclusions about the nature of the Kingdom in Jesus' teaching, rejecting the current ethical view of it in favor of an eschatological understanding.<sup>5</sup>

Schweitzer's and Weiss' work met with initial resistance from those who found the eschatological element in Jesus' proclamation disturbing. However, aided by the pessimistic mood created by World War II, scholars were ready to recognize that Jesus should indeed be understood against the background of apocalyptic expectations based on the Old Testament prophetic hope for the establishment of the Kingdom. The legacy of Schweitzer has forced a reevaluation of many constructions of the life of Jesus which often reflected 19-century ideologies and interests based on Kantian ethical idealism, rather than on the evidence of Scripture.

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<sup>4</sup> *20th Cent.*, xi.

<sup>5</sup> *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* (New York: Schocken, 1914), first pub. 1901.

Remarkably however, neither Weiss, nor Schweitzer saw the need 'to have his own position [on the Kingdom] seem to be identical with that of Jesus!'<sup>6</sup> It would appear that the message of the historical Jesus was deemed unsuitable for his modern followers!

The rediscovery of the apocalyptic-eschatological Jesus prompted Bultmann and C. H. Dodd to deal with the troublesome issue of how Jesus' message could still be affirmed as central and authoritative, in spite of its eschatological orientation.<sup>7</sup> As Richard Hiers points out,

The historical eschatological Jesus called into question the beliefs and claims of both liberal and traditional Christianity. Liberal Christianity viewed Jesus primarily as teacher and exemplar of a timeless ethic of love, who had either proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was present in the hearts of individuals through the experience of communion with God or who had called people of all times to the task of bringing the Kingdom of God (or extending its influence) on earth through moral action and social reform.<sup>8</sup>

Both Bultmann and Dodd had to deal with the claim that Jesus had expected the Kingdom to be established supernaturally within a very short time. Since the Kingdom had not arrived, his message about the Kingdom would come into doubt. Traditionally it had been held that salvation was through faith in the crucified and risen Savior. Thus Jesus' announcement of the coming Kingdom was unimportant, except as reinterpreted to mean the establishment of the church or to affirm that Christians 'go to heaven' when they die.

The offence of the rediscovery of the apocalyptic Kingdom in Jesus' Gospel message must not be underestimated.

When the Catholic scholar, Alfred Loisy, set out his conclusions as to Jesus' eschatological beliefs—which closely resembled Weiss's and Schweitzer's, the Catholic Church responded with formal sanctions and personal vilification, and proceeded to put the lid on Catholic biblical scholarship for several decades.<sup>9</sup>

The British Christian Platonist, C. H. Dodd, was equal to the challenge of the new discoveries. Taking as the decisive text Mat.

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<sup>6</sup> D. L. Holland, 'History, Theology and the Kingdom of God: A Contribution of Johannes Weiss to Twentieth-Century Theology,' *Biblical Research* 13, 1968, 56.

<sup>7</sup> *20th Cent.*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> *20th Cent.*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> *20th Cent.*, 17.

12:28 (par. Luke 11:20), he proposed the theory which J. E. Fison was later to characterize as 'flatly and frankly heretical by New Testament standards'<sup>10</sup> that Jesus declared the Kingdom to be 'a matter of present experience,' and not 'something to come in the near future.'<sup>11</sup> According to Dodd, sayings about eating and drinking in the Kingdom referred to a 'transcendent order beyond space and time.'<sup>12</sup> Dodd's theory ran into difficulty with those texts which plainly envisaged the coming of the Kingdom at the Parousia. His only reply was to dismiss futurist statements about the Kingdom as later additions by the church. Richard Hiers charges Dodd, not without reason, of by-passing or ignoring certain texts, most notably

the first petition of the Lord's prayer, Mat. 6:10=Luke 11:2, which clearly indicates that Jesus looked for the coming of the Kingdom as the decisive event confronting His contemporaries.<sup>13</sup>

One may disagree with Hiers that Jesus expected that the Kingdom would come in his lifetime, but his point against Dodd, echoed by many others, can hardly be disputed.

A distaste for the futurist, apocalyptic Kingdom was reflected in Bultmann's theology in a different way, but with no less disastrous results for Jesus' central message. Bultmann fully recognized the eschatological element of the New Testament proclamation, but circumvented it by claiming to extract from the Jewish 'husk,' by a process of 'demythologizing,' the essential, permanent element, namely the challenge of the 'crisis of decision.' Bultmann was able thus to claim that the 'Kerygma' (as 'reinterpreted' along the lines of existentialist philosophy) replaces 'the historical Jesus as the message addressing later generations'<sup>14</sup> But, as Hiers goes on to say,

If the substance of Jesus' preaching is as of little consequence theologically, as Bultmann claims, one might ask why he goes to the trouble of 'demythologizing' Jesus' message.<sup>15</sup>

A mediating position between the Schweitzer/Weiss school and that of Dodd/Bultmann was achieved by W. G. Kümmel and

<sup>10</sup> J. E. Fison in *The Christian Hope* (Longmans, 1954), cited by Leon Morris in *New International Commentary on I Thessalonians*, 147.

<sup>11</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York, Scribner's, 1961), 29-31.

<sup>12</sup> *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 38-40.

<sup>13</sup> *20th Cent.*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Hiers, *20th Cent.*, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Hiers, *20th Cent.*, 27.

George Eldon Ladd. Seeking to balance the extremes of their predecessors in the study of the Kingdom, they proposed that the Kingdom was both present and future. Perhaps, in fact, they were in agreement with Bultmann's belief that 'although the Kingdom is entirely future it wholly determines the present.'<sup>16</sup> The important factor in this insight is that the *future* Kingdom is primary, and the present aspect is derived from it. The exorcisms of Jesus are signs of the Kingdom operating in advance. W. G. Kümmel did not lose sight of 'statements which presume or expressly mention not the nearness but the futurity of the Kingdom of God.'<sup>17</sup> Kümmel was persuaded that Jesus was mistaken about the expected immediate arrival of the Kingdom. This would seem seriously to undermine the authority of Jesus. However, Kümmel is adamant in his insistence that the coming Kingdom must not be detached from history. His statement is of particular interest as a caution against the systems of Dodd and Bultmann and the earlier liberals:

Since the New Testament announces as its central message an act of God at a definite moment in history to be a final redemptive act, the mythological form of the conception cannot simply be detached from this central message: for it would mean that the New Testament message itself is abrogated, if a timeless message concerning the present as the time of decision or concerning the spiritual nearness of God replaces the preaching of the eschatological future and the determination of the present by that future. *Therefore it is impossible to eliminate the concept of time and with it the future eschatology from the eschatological message of Jesus.*<sup>18</sup>

George Eldon Ladd's investigation of the Kingdom originated in his discovery that 'no available interpretation of the Kingdom of God seemed to square with the Biblical data.'<sup>19</sup> We are indebted to Ladd for his emphasis on the 'two ages' scheme which certainly underlies Jesus' thinking, and his conclusion that the dynamic reign of God invades the present age 'without transforming it into the age to come.'<sup>20</sup> With this insight he holds present and future in tension without losing sight of the time-rooted future. Ladd

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<sup>16</sup> *Jesus and the Word* (New York, Scribner's, 1958), 51.

<sup>17</sup> *Promise and Fulfillment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus* (London, SCM Press, 1957).

<sup>18</sup> *Promise and Fulfillment*, 148, emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> G. E. Ladd, *The Pattern of New Testament Truth* (Eerdman's, 1968), 47.

<sup>20</sup> *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Eerdmans, 1974), 149.

also grappled with the Olivet discourse, concluding that Jesus interwove history and eschatology without clearly distinguishing the two. It might be simpler to say, however, that Jesus envisaged a period of great distress in Jerusalem just prior to the Parousia.

We conclude our historical survey by mentioning the work of Norman Perrin. Striking out in a new direction, he rejects the idea that the Kingdom of God is a concept at all. It is, in fact, a 'tensive symbol' which can evoke 'a whole range or series of conceptions,<sup>21</sup> but which makes no particular reference to a 'present' or 'future.' God is King for the existential realities of life.

What is to be made of these differing views of Jesus' favorite theme? It would seem that the Gospel itself is at stake here, since Jesus spoke constantly of the 'Gospel about the Kingdom,' inviting belief in *that* message long before a word was heard about his sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection (Mk. 1:14,15, Lk. 4:43, etc. with Lk. 18:31-34). Indeed the Apostles, as Luke makes abundantly clear, continued *after the resurrection* to propagate the same Gospel message of the Kingdom God (Acts 8:12, 14:22, 19:8, 20:25, 28:23,31).

We suggest that much of the confusion about the meaning of the Kingdom, and thus about the Christian message itself, arises from the failure of all of the above mentioned schemes to *define the future Kingdom*. Very little light is thrown on the Kingdom by simply saying that it is both present and future. Though certainly there is a present aspect of the Kingdom of God and a future one, it must be recognized that of the two aspects one is determinative and the other derived. This is the strength of Weiss and Schweitzer and it is corroborated by Shailer Matthews' *The Messianic Hope in the New Testament*.<sup>22</sup> Firstly he rightly insists on the indispensable element of eschatology in the New Testament presentation of the Kingdom. He strongly opposes the view that:

the Kingdom of God plays no important role in apostolic Christianity; that all matters eschatological were no more to the primitive church and Paul and the first fathers than they are to a modern treatise upon systematic theology. 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 movement, Christianity, would suggest the contrary opinion. So far from the eschatological Kingdom

<sup>21</sup> *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Fortress Press, 1980), 33.

<sup>22</sup> University of Chicago Press, 1905.

of God being a secondary element in the early church, *it is its great conditioning belief.*<sup>23</sup>

Shailer Matthews' exhaustive analysis of Jesus' concept of the Kingdom yields the following results:

With Jesus, as with the Pharisees, the Kingdom of God was still future. Repentance was urged, not at the means of bringing in the Kingdom, but as a preparation for membership in it when, in the Father's good pleasure, it should appear. The Kingdom is thus a gift of God, destined to come, not as the product of social evolution, but suddenly, as something already prepared before the foundation of the world.<sup>24</sup>

Matthews is fully prepared to see a present element in Jesus' concept of the Kingdom, but he maintains that

at the very best the passages which can be quoted in favor of the existing present kingdom are exceedingly few, while those which more naturally must be interpreted to refer to the future kingdom are all but constant.

The entire scheme of Jesus' teaching is

so thoroughly like that which it has been shown he must have inherited, as to render the substitution of new definitions for those inherited improbable in the highest degree. The historico-grammatical process, if it is worth anything, demands that of the two uses of the term kingdom [present and future], the eschatological be chosen as fundamental.

He concludes that the future kingdom is primary for Jesus. The present kingdom is derived from it.

Any strict definition of the Kingdom of God as used by Jesus must be eschatological. With Jesus as with his contemporaries the kingdom was yet to come. Its appearance would be the result of no social evolution, but sudden as the gift of God; men could not hasten its coming; they could only prepare for membership in it.<sup>25</sup>

To this understanding of the Kingdom the present writer feels compelled by the evidence of the New Testament. The fact that the eschatological Kingdom is not more widely accepted can be traced to the antipathy of 'modern scientific man' to the notion of a future divine intervention. But Jesus can be modernized only at

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<sup>23</sup> p. 145, emphasis added. Harnack agrees: 'The Gospel entered the world as an apocalyptic eschatological message, apocalyptic and eschatological not only in its form, but in its content' (*History of Dogma*, Vol. I, 56).

<sup>24</sup> *The Messianic Hope*, 72.

<sup>25</sup> *op. cit.*, 80, 82.

the expense of his whole Gospel Message of the Kingdom! All attempts to explain the Kingdom apart from its Old Testament heritage rooted in the prospect of the Day of the Lord and the following Messianic Kingdom in a renewed earth are bound to fail. This has not prevented modern authors from continuing to promote a kingdom shorn of its apocalyptic associations.

Rosemary Reuther's historical examination of the Western experience of Messianic hope<sup>26</sup> sheds invaluable light on the context in which Jesus' Message of the Kingdom is to be understood. She confirms that the original Christian world-view followed a pattern which she calls 'the apocalyptic crisis.' Apocalypticism is traced to Jewish prophetic futurism, with the book of Daniel as a leading influence. The elements of this philosophy of history are so important for the understanding of Jesus that they deserve to be reviewed briefly.

God had made a covenant with his people that He would be their God and they would be His people . . . . The covenanted people were promised that they would be a mighty nation. They would inherit a land flowing with milk and honey. They would possess the land in peace, virtue and prosperity . . . . In the light of the covenant and promise, catastrophes upon the people were interpreted as the infidelity of the people to God . . . . So enters the prophetic motif of judgement . . . . God seeks to convert the people and bring them back to fidelity to Him. When that happens, then the long-awaited promise will be fulfilled. The images of godliness, happiness, prosperity, fruitfulness and peace can then be brought forth as symbols of this expected deliverance. These structures of thought proved a constant key by which the Jewish people interpreted their own history in relation to God. This expected fulfillment of the promise was not an otherworldly salvation but a future-worldly era that stands as both the ideal and the historical goal of the community.

An intrinsic part of the 'apocalyptic crisis' scheme is the all pervasive influence of cosmic evil which has

captured the world, so that this world has escaped from the dominion of God and become alien to Him. It has become the kingdom of the evil one . . . . Salvation can come only by a radical overthrow of this present world, this present epoch, and the inauguration of a radically new world and epoch founded on a different principle, on the principle of God's dominion and not that of the demonic powers. *There must be a great cosmic showdown between God and the powers and principalities of 'this world', an*

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<sup>26</sup> *The Radical Kingdom, The Western Experience of Messianic Hope* (Paulist Press, 1970).

*overthrow once and for all and the creation of a new order in which God's justice and righteousness will be vindicated and prevail . . .* Within the apocalyptic perspective, however, this thousand-year messianic reign is not seen as an evolutionary process, although it was later interpreted as such. Rather, evil is seen as eliminated once and for all in a sudden intervention that takes place between history and the beginning of the messianic reign. Thereafter good reigns without ambiguity . . . It would be contradictory to say that 'Christ has come' and yet still to have wars, diseases and injustices abroad in the land. The coming of the Messiah and the coming of the Messianic age are identical.<sup>27</sup>

As a description of the New Testament Messianic outlook on the future, this would be hard to match. Though Christ has appeared, the Kingdom has not yet come. Its arrival is expected at the Parousia, which will indeed be a cosmic showdown (Mt. 24:29–31, II Thes. 1:7,8, etc.). Had this philosophy of history been retained by believers, who claim to rely on the Bible as the normative standard in matters of faith, there would be little argument about Jesus' central concept, the Kingdom of God. It appears, however, that theologians do not find this perspective acceptable—which may mean that Jesus' teaching is less popular than has been thought.

Georgia Harkness's illuminating study, *Understanding the Kingdom of God*,<sup>28</sup> wrestles gallantly with the problem of the Kingdom, but does she hear how illogically she abandons the element she does not like—the element of 'apocalyptic crisis'? Whenever she comes across passages in Jesus' teaching which seem to reflect Jewish Messianism, she responds by saying that 'this does not sound like Jesus.' But this is to argue in a circle. Her Jesus is permanently non-violent and cannot therefore have threatened to exterminate his enemies at the Parousia. (That Jesus advocated non-violence for his followers for the present time while they reside as 'aliens' and ambassadors in a hostile world is not in dispute.) But if she were to abandon this selective use of the evidence and allow the apocalyptic Jesus to speak clearly both from the gospels, epistles and Revelation, her construction of the Kingdom of God would be quite different. She seems ultimately to fall back into the liberal habit of restructuring the teaching of Jesus about the Kingdom to fit modern ideals (not that the church has a good record of implementing ideals of non-violence!). The findings of Weiss and Schweitzer have made little impact on her

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<sup>27</sup> *op. cit.*, 4–9, emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup> Abingdon Press, 1974.

theology of the Kingdom, however interesting they may be as historical studies.

Harkness points to the error implied by the slogan 'Jesus preached the Kingdom of God. We preach Jesus.' She asks: 'But can we preach Jesus or even understand Him without understanding God's kingly rule, the central note in all His teaching?'<sup>29</sup> Should we not also ask: Can we preach Jesus or even understand him if we eliminate the apocalyptic strain that is woven into all his teaching? Harkness notes that

there is a passage in Luke so cruel and vindictive in its implications, so unlike the whole spirit of Jesus that it is seldom quoted, if indeed it is discovered: 'Slay my enemies in my presence' (Lk. 19:27).

She solves the difficulty by doubting whether Jesus could have said any such thing. She is confident that

Jesus rejected outright the historic and in his time the most common understanding of the Messiah as a political deliverer who would restore Israel to its former greatness under David.<sup>30</sup>

How then does she deal with the evident fact that the apostles, as intimate students of Jesus' ministry of the Kingdom, including forty days of post-resurrection instruction on the Kingdom will be restored to Israel (Acts 1:6)? They maintain the historic, Messianic view of the Kingdom. Harkness' response to the presence of the 'Jewish' Kingdom in the mind of the Apostles goes far beyond anything said in the text. She thinks that

The difficulty encountered by even Jesus' closest disciples to grasp His message is evidenced by the fact that when they came together they asked about the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel. The Davidic Messiah was still their dream! Jesus apparently thought it was useless to argue with them.<sup>31</sup>

Jesus was, however, not in the habit of overlooking a gross misunderstanding about the Kingdom, if such this was. The fact is that their question reflects an eschatology which Jesus had nowhere discouraged (Mt. 19:28, Lk 22:28-30, etc.) and which strongly confirms the apocalyptic framework in which his teaching is set. If we allow the question as the natural one in the light of what Jesus expected about the future Kingdom, it will not be necessary to suspect, as Harkness does, that

<sup>29</sup> Harkness, 17.

<sup>30</sup> *op. cit.*, 82.

<sup>31</sup> *op. cit.*, 84.

Jesus' apocalypticism was probably distorted in the records of the synoptics.<sup>32</sup>

One cannot avoid the suspicion that there is a strong anti-apocalyptic tendency in nearly all contemporary examinations of the Kingdom in the teaching of Jesus. Commentators seem determined to make Jesus 'one of us.' The danger with this 'demessianizing' is that Jesus' Gospel about the Kingdom, the saving message presented by him as well as the Apostles, becomes radically distorted. A principal ingredient of the message is either ignored or reinterpreted to make it more congenial to our 'modern' outlook.

The conclusion to which one is driven after inspecting the current debate about the Kingdom of God is that the *future* Kingdom nearly always suffers neglect. It is either ignored or left entirely undefined. If undefined, it is of little value to speak of the Kingdom as both present and future, as though there is no difference in the form of the Kingdom at two different points of time. This would be like saying that an engagement period is not different from a subsequent wedding. While a wedding might be said to be 'present' in some sense even during the period of preparation for it, we have no doubt that the wedding, properly speaking, is future, and clearly differentiated from the present period. So with the Kingdom. The presence of the Kingdom may be experienced as a foretaste of what it will be in the future. But in the future it is to come with a cataclysmic divine intervention, the Day of the Lord of the prophets which becomes the Parousia of the New Testament. That event will issue in a world-wide extension of the Kingdom under Messiah's rule, as all the prophets announced.

The weakness of so much one reads about the Kingdom is that the Day of the Lord has been eliminated from the discussion. The Kingdom of God is bound then to consist in some way of an evolutionary process which we must work for, rather than the new era lying the other side of the Day of the Lord, as all the prophets and the New Testament see it (cp. Lk 21:31). This, perhaps, is only to say that modern theologians have largely abandoned the 'adventist' outlook which pervades the New Testament and which is all part and parcel of Jesus' apocalyptic outlook. But Jesus' Messianic perspective colors all he teaches and simply cannot be subtracted from his teaching without drastically altering the whole.

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<sup>32</sup> Harkness, 90.

To sum up, the situation appears to be that evangelicals largely avoid the 'Gospel of the Kingdom' for fear of association with the 'social Gospel' tradition of Walter Rauschenbusch. 'Liberals,' on the other hand, welcome the 'gospel of the Kingdom,' but reinterpret it by getting rid of its strongly apocalyptic emphasis in the teaching of Jesus. Thus neither 'camp' relays the gospel as Jesus taught it. The revealing glimpse of the apostolic mind in Acts 1:6, where the results of Jesus' teaching are echoed in the Apostles' hope that the Kingdom will be restored to Israel, still waits to be seized as the key to the mind of Jesus, whose view of the Kingdom of God is most unlike the view claiming his support in churches.

Mortimer Arias' fascinating study of the Kingdom<sup>33</sup> asks the question: 'Why is it that Kingdom language has disappeared from evangelization and often from theology itself?'<sup>34</sup> 'We seem to be faced with an eclipse of the reign of God lasting from the apostolic age to the present, particularly in our theology for evangelization.'<sup>35</sup> He describes this situation as 'painful and serious.'<sup>36</sup> 'The Good News of the Kingdom is not the way we describe the gospel and evangelization. Herein lies the problem . . . .'<sup>37</sup> 'Why did I not see it before? Kingdom evangelization may be the answer to our present crisis.'<sup>38</sup> Arias traces the origin of what appears to be a disastrous loss of Jesus' Gospel:

Jesus came announcing 'the Good News of the Kingdom of God. That is my mission' (Luke 4:43). But we have instead been preaching 'the plan of salvation' or some other evangelistic formula, and we have called that 'evangelism.'<sup>39</sup>

'Why is it that we, the preachers and evangelists who are supposed to proclaim the gospel of Jesus, the Christ, seem to have missed the central aspect of Jesus' teaching?'<sup>40</sup>

Then comes a personal confession:

When I left the seminary for the first time, I had no clear idea of the Kingdom of God and I had no place in my theology for the second coming or parousia . . . . I had no concerns about the future . . . . I

<sup>33</sup>*Announcing the Reign of God, Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Fortress Press, 1984).

<sup>34</sup> *op. cit.*, 41.

<sup>35</sup> *op. cit.*, 55.

<sup>36</sup> *op. cit.*, 66.

<sup>37</sup> *op. cit.*, xiii.

<sup>38</sup> *op. cit.*, xvii.

<sup>39</sup> *op. cit.*, 1.

<sup>40</sup> *op. cit.*, 9.

sincerely believe that part of our problem with the theology of evangelization, and with the illusive issue of motivation, has very much to do with a defective (and more defective because it has been implicit rather than deliberate) eschatology.<sup>41</sup>

Arias' work has the character of a prophetic call to the churches to return to the Gospel of the Kingdom, with no retreat from the apocalyptic implied by 'the Kingdom of God.' Richard Hiers confirms the findings of Arias, tracing our current confusion over Jesus' Gospel to the 'unwillingness on the part of interpreters to take seriously Jesus' eschatological outlook.'

New Testament specialists have failed to expose to public view (and often to their own awareness) the specifically eschatological nature of Jesus' beliefs and preaching indicated by the synoptic tradition.<sup>42</sup>

It would appear that the Weiss/Schweitzer revolution with which our century began is still having its effect. Yet its progress is hampered by the antipathy of 'theology' to a biblical understanding of the Kingdom. 'Adventists' have been complaining for 150 years that the apocalyptic strain in the teaching of Jesus was not being taken seriously. Perhaps Mortimer Arias' plea for a return to the synoptic tradition about the Gospel of the Kingdom will be heard. Meanwhile one can only wonder whether the authentic voice of Jesus easily gets a hearing in contemporary assessments of His teaching. The conclusions of Richard Hiers may turn out to be a justifiable commentary on the way in which we have rejected Jesus:

There can be no doubt that Jesus and the evangelists looked for the future actualization of the decisive 'last' events: the Coming of the Son of Man . . . and the coming of the Kingdom or coming age. That this certainly has played but little part in contemporary exegesis and theology can be attributed primarily to the dogmatic or philosophical interests (or aversions) of the 'doers' of exegesis and theology. It is only quite recently that these 'futuristic' beliefs are coming to be recognized as something other than a primitive Jewish and early Christian absurdity to be disposed of quickly and, if possible, quietly . . . . It is significant that advocates of 'realized' and 'futuristic' eschatology generally end by eliminating the future expectation or its significance altogether.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *op. cit.*, 85, 87.

<sup>42</sup> *The Kingdom of God in the Synoptic Tradition* (University of Florida Press, 1970), 3, 4.

<sup>43</sup> *op. cit.*, 96.

In so doing they may well turn out to be the unwitting wreckers of the Gospel of the Kingdom as Jesus proclaimed it. The Gospel of the Kingdom is, after all, the Gospel of God and of Christ and central to the Christian faith.

J. Ramsay Michaels concluded that 'although there was a present aspect to the Kingdom of God that truly went back to the historical Jesus, this aspect was derivative in his thinking and not primary. Explicitly, the kingdom Jesus proclaimed was future; only implicitly could it be regarded as present.'<sup>44</sup> An analysis of the recorded sayings of Jesus confirms this primacy of the future Kingdom, and, since the Gospel is about the Kingdom, the primacy of the future Kingdom *in the Gospel message itself*. It is an embarrassment over the future, apocalyptic dimension in Jesus' message which drives much evangelicalism to construct its Gospel from the letters of Paul, concentrating almost exclusively on the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, i.e. a gospel *about* Jesus to the exclusion of the message preached by him.<sup>45</sup>

However, it is methodologically unsound to derive one's information about the content of the Gospel primarily from the communications of Paul to those whom he had previously evangelized. The statements of Luke in Acts about what Paul preached as the Gospel to potential converts are curiously avoided by modern evangelists. Luke reports that the Kingdom was the first topic on Paul's evangelistic agenda (Acts 19:8, 20:24,25, 28:23, 31). Luke's insistence on the Apostolic preaching of the

<sup>44</sup> 'The Kingdom of God and the Historical Jesus,' in *The Kingdom of God in 20-Century Interpretation*, Wendell Willis, ed. (Hendrickson, 1987), 110. The few synoptic statements which are claimed as evidence for the presence of the Kingdom may be less clear than has been thought. Mat. 12:28 speaks of the Kingdom 'coming upon' one who has been freed from demon oppression. But does 'epthasen' imply anything more than that the person is destined for the Kingdom? The wrath which has 'come upon' ('epthasen') the Jews (I Thes. 2:16) remains the 'wrath to come' (I Thes. 1:10). See further Richard Hiers, *The Kingdom of God in the Synoptic Tradition* (Univ. of Florida Press, 1970), 30-35. Luke 17:21 may also be understood with the NEB footnote and Hiers (op. cit., 22-29) as a reference to the future coming of the Kingdom. As Hiers points out Lucan eschatology is elsewhere 'unequivocally futuristic, so far as the Kingdom of God is concerned' (op. cit., 29). Even if we read these passages as evidence for the presence of the power of the Kingdom, we are not relieved of the duty of defining the much more frequently mentioned future Kingdom.

<sup>45</sup> II Jn. 7-9, I Tim 6:3 and Heb. 2:3 would seem to be directed against this tendency. These verses have not prevented evangelicals from adopting an unconscious 'dispensationalism' in their selection of texts to support their presentation of the Gospel. They draw heavily on selected verses from Paul and John with no mention of the Gospel of the Kingdom.

Kingdom has been missed. Paul followed his Master exactly, and he saw his own preaching as a continuation of the preaching of Jesus. Jesus must be heard, not merely heard about, in order that the saving word may take root in the believer's heart (Rom. 10:14). This is exactly the point of the parable of the sower (Lk 8:12, Mt. 13:19), where contact with the saving message about the Kingdom of God is the basis for conversion.

The practical effects of admitting the Kingdom of God into the Gospel are firstly that Jesus' message about the Kingdom will be reinstated after a long absence. However, this will be impossible until the future Kingdom is defined. Thus far, we seem to have progressed little beyond saying that the Kingdom is in some sense present and in some sense future. But in what sense?

Here we must abandon our longstanding antipathy to the Messianism of Jesus. We must recover the Old Testament basis of the proclamation of the Kingdom as the advance announcement of the coming Day of the Lord which will issue in universal peace on earth (Is. 2:2-4, Dn. 2:44, 7:27, etc.). John the Baptist so understands the message of the Kingdom (Mt. 3:2-12), and there is nothing to suggest that Jesus held a different view. He, too, declares that the Kingdom is 'at hand' (Mt. 4:17).

It would be quite out of harmony with Jesus' prophetic, Messianic outlook to insist that he or John the Baptist intended to establish a time-limit for the continuation of the present age prior to the coming of the Kingdom, whose advent the church is to pray for (Mat. 6:10). To say that the Kingdom is 'at hand' does not imply that it will come within a certain time. The prophets constantly anticipated the Day of the Lord as 'at hand.' Jesus takes up their cry. The kingdom's 'imminence' challenges those who hear the message to take urgent steps to prepare for it, rather than setting a date for its arrival. Even Jesus' declaration that this 'generation' will not pass until the crisis at the end has come is no proof that he set a date for the Parousia. 'Genea' may well be understood as 'the present evil society organized in opposition to God.' It is that system which will not be replaced until all the apocalyptic woes detailed in Mk. 13 have been experienced.<sup>46</sup>

Nor does the famous anticipation of the Kingdom in Mk. 9:1 prove conclusively that Jesus expected the Kingdom to arrive

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<sup>46</sup> Cp. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge University Press, 1972), 284. Commenting on *genea* in Mk. 8:38, he points out that 'age' is the primary meaning of the Hebrew *dor*, which the LXX regularly translates as *genea*. Furthermore the present *genea* is contrasted by Jesus with the time when he 'comes in the glory of his father,' i.e. at the beginning of the age to come. Cp. Ps. 102:18, LXX.

within a few years. All three gospel writers see the fulfillment of Jesus striking statement in the proleptic 'arrival' of the Kingdom in vision only (Mt. 17:9) at the transfiguration. So Peter also understood the transfiguration—as a glimpse of the Kingdom to come at the Parousia (II Pet. 1:16–18).<sup>47</sup>

The Gospel of the Kingdom, which is no different from the Gospel of grace (Acts 20:24,25), invites us to believe in the purposes of God, both for the individual and for the world. It is essentially an 'adventist' message summoning us to take with utmost seriousness not only what God has done in Christ but what he is going to do by sending his Son back to the earth. It is a message calculated by its urgency and connection with the great Day of the Parousia to motivate to the utmost. The realism of the hope inspired by the promise of the future Kingdom is an indispensable part of the Christian's weapon against discouragement. It provides also a strong stimulus for growth. And on the hope contained in the Gospel Message faith and love are built (Col. 1:4,5). But this strongly future orientation of the Gospel message has been eclipsed by a traditional antagonism to the Jewish apocalyptic framework of Jesus' Kerygma, which ill accords with our gnostically inclined view of the future. While we speak mostly of souls departing the earth, Jesus announces resurrection-life for the saved on the earth (Mat. 5:5). To inherit the Kingdom offered by the Gospel is to come into possession of the world as children of Abraham (Rom. 4:13). It is to rule over the regathered tribes (Mt. 19:28), to govern the new world-order (I Cor. 6:2, Heb. 2:5) and to be enlisted as a citizen of New Jerusalem, a city on earth with which the Kingdom of God is properly associated (Lk. 19:11). All this is none other than what the prophets yearned for. It is our tragedy that we have so easily dispensed with the Old Testament as a source of vision for the future. This is precisely what Jesus did not do. His Gospel is rooted in Daniel and in Isaiah (for example, 52:7) where both nationalism and universalism combine, and 'spiritual' is not divorced from real political structures operating in a renewed earth.

J. Ramsey Michaels is right to speak of the 'strongly future orientation of Jesus' own proclamation of the Kingdom.'<sup>48</sup> He

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<sup>47</sup> Cp. Cranfield, op. cit., 287: 'The interpretation [of Mark 9:1] which (in our judgement) is most probably is one that goes back to the early Church—that sees a reference to the Transfiguration.' This is strongly suggested by the careful noting of the number of days in 9:2.

<sup>48</sup> *Kingdom of God*, 112.

insists also that Paul's earnest expectation of the coming Kingdom is no less pronounced (I Cor. 6:9,10; 15:50, Gal. 5:21, Eph. 5:5, I Thes. 2:2, II Thes. 1:5, Col. 5:11; cp. II Tim. 4:1,18). As a remedy for our present vagueness about the Kingdom of God he proposes that we abandon our unscriptural dichotomy of 'spiritual' and 'physical' in relation to future things.

'The tendency of much Christian scholarship has been to minimize the Jewishness or ethnicity of Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God with the observation that he had no interest in a political kingdom or one that could be established by military might or rebellion against Roman rule. The tacit assumption is that non-political means non-nationalistic, which in turn means non-ethnic and non Jewish, but instead 'spiritual' and 'universal'. Actually the Kingdom of God in Jewish expectation was both spiritual and national, both universal and ethnic.<sup>49</sup>

Such an understanding of the Kingdom harmonizes exactly with the sort of Kingdom envisaged by Daniel (Dan 7:27) and by Jesus' contemporaries (Ps. Sol. 17:3-4), as well as by the fully instructed apostles in Acts 1:6 (cf. Lk. 19:11).

The old argument that the 'husk' of Jewish Messianism must be stripped from Jesus' message so that the message may be made relevant is beginning to crumble under the pressure of a return to the historical, Jewish Jesus. The 'husk', in fact, is nothing less than the apocalyptic Kingdom on which Jesus' message is centered. We must put behind us (not without some shame that we have so often 'reinterpreted' Jesus to fit our own presuppositions) our pictures of Jesus as a hellenized savior figure, or as J. Ramsey Michaels says, 'even a gnostic before his time.'<sup>50</sup> Perhaps it is we who have been guilty of gnosticizing the Gospel of the Kingdom for we have wanted a Jesus who is anything but a Jewish apocalyptic prophet announcing, as his Gospel, the still future end of the age and with it the coming Kingdom of God on earth.

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<sup>49</sup> op. cit., 114.

<sup>50</sup> op. cit., 117.