

The Kingdom Coming, Come or Both?

Published on: 04/02/2009

Don Williams, Ph.D.

...Jesus proclaimed a kingdom come and coming, both future and present at the same time. Here we are on dead center. Jesus believes in the reestablishment of God's rightful reign in Israel and among the Gentile nations. His mission inaugurates that reign. While God's kingdom is present in his ministry, it is not fully present. There is a future fulfillment when Satan, sin and death will be completely destroyed. At the same time, Jesus comes to manifest God's direct rule here and now, healing the sick, casting out demons, bringing justice to the poor and defeating our enemies. This means that the future messianic kingdom has dawned; it has broken in upon us. Furthermore, it is God's intention to spread this kingdom around the world (to the Gentiles) and down through history until its consummation. In sum, the kingdom is really here but it is not fully here. Believers, then, live in the tension between the kingdom come and coming, the "already and the not yet."

For the New Testament, history is determined by two ages: this present evil age and the coming age of salvation. (See Matthew 12:32) Oscar Cullmann in his classic book, *Christ and Time*, shows us that this structure is not optional for understanding and retaining the biblical message. Illustrating the meaning of Jesus' coming, Cullmann uses his classic example of the World War II distinction between "D-Day" and "V-Day." When the allies established the Normandy beachhead on "D-Day," the war in Europe was really won. Yet, "V-Day" remained in the future and the battle went on. Likewise, when Jesus came as God's Messiah (Deliverer), it was "D-Day," the beachhead of God's kingdom was secured. It literally broke in upon us as the future became present. Nevertheless, we await its final consummation. When Jesus returns it will be "V-Day." The Christian life is then lived in this tension between the kingdom come and coming.

This illuminates our present experience. It explains both the reality of our triumph in Christ and the continuing spiritual warfare which we fight on many fronts. It explains the reality that we have died with Christ, and the flesh still wars against the spirit. It explains why some people are dramatically healed by the power of God and also continue to get sick and die. It explains why we have strength through weakness and life through death. If we break this tension we either end up in the resignation of "cessationism" (God doesn't work miracles today), or the triumphalism of perfectionism (God always works miracles if we have the faith to believe him). The good news is that the future kingdom is now at work in the present. We are not waiting for the end; we are living in the end. By the power of the Spirit we are enabled to live between the times.

For us, the Christian life will always be lived in tension. All whom we evangelize will not be converted. All whom we pray for will not be healed. But some will as the kingdom breaks in. Jesus teaches us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." This is not a magic prayer bringing the perfection of heaven down to earth, which would be dualistic Platonism. This is an eschatological prayer asking for the future kingdom to break in upon us in the present. It is also our prayer for the consummation of all things. Paradoxically, as we live in the end we wait and pray for the end to come. Paul writes, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God, the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet." (I Corinthians 15:22-25)

Bibliography

- Cullmann, Oscar, *Christ and Time* (New York: Gordon Press, 1977)
Dodd, C. H., *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet, 1936)
Schweitzer, A., *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York, MacMillan, 1957)