

Lesson 6

THE KINGDOM CONCEPT

One of the major differences between amils and premils is over the concept of the kingdom. Is it earthly or spiritual? Is it now or future or both? Amils believe that there is only a present spiritual kingdom in the hearts of true believers with Christ ruling over His church as the Messianic King. Premils believe that the complete fulfillment of the kingdom will not come until the second advent of Christ and the earthly kingdom with Christ reigning over it.

The first step in determining the concept of the kingdom is to determine the concept of the kingdom in the Old Testament and then seek to fit the teachings of the New Testament with that of the Old Testament. Obviously scholars disagree and that is why there are different interpretations. Some of the confusion, however, can be eliminated by getting a right concept of the “kingdom of heaven” and “the kingdom of God in the New Testament.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Much confusion has come among evangelical scholars because of early, hard line Dispensationalists who attempted to make a clear-cut distinction between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. Strict Dispensationalists believe that “the kingdom of heaven” is a Jewish term and refers to the earthly, Messianic and Davidic kingdom while the term kingdom of God refers to the universal kingdom which includes all creatures (men and angels) who are subject to the will of God. The kingdom of heaven would also include Christendom as a whole—those who profess and those who possess salvation (cf. Scofield Ref. Bible). This interpretation allows the kingdom of heaven to be offered to and rejected by Israel and then has the kingdom of God refer to the church. The term kingdom of heaven only appears in the Gospel of Matthew written to the Jews.

It is exegetically impossible to make this kind of distinction for the Bible is clear that the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are one and the same concept (Matt. 4:17; 10:7 cf. Mark 1:15; Matt. 5:3,11 cf. Luke 20; Matt. 5:10 cf. 2 Thess. 1:5; Matt. 7:21 cf. 1 Cor. 4:20; Matt. 8:11, 12 cf. Luke 13:28,29, Matt. 11:11 cf. Luke 7:28; Matt. 13:3, 11 cf. Mark 4:3, 11; Matt. 13:31 cf. Luke 13: 18; Matt. 13:33 cf. Luke 13:20; Matt. 18:3 cf. Mark 10:15; Matt. 19:14 cf. Mark 10:14; Matt. 19:23 cf. Mark 10:23). Even in the Gospel of Matthew the two kingdoms are used interchangeably (Matt. 19:23 cf. Matt. 19:24).

The Gospel of Matthew was written to the Jews but not for the Jews only, and the term kingdom is simply following the Jewish custom of substituting the word “heaven,” the place of God’s dwelling, for the Divine Name (Luke 15:18,21; Matt. 21:25; Mark 14:61). The word “heaven” was very often used instead of “God” so as to avoid unduly familiarizing the ear with the sacred Name.

Once it has been determined that the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are the same, then it must be determined whether these terms refer to a future earthly Davidic kingdom, a future spiritual kingdom, a present spiritual kingdom, or to both a present and future kingdom.

DISPENSATIONALISM

Definition

Kingdom (*basileia*) means “reign” or a “rule.” A reign (authority) also includes a realm of people to rule over.

Old Testament Concept of the Kingdom

Dispensationalists believe that in the Old Testament there was an eternal, universal kingdom (Psa. 10:16; 29:10; 103:19, Isa. 6:1; Jer. 10:10; Lam. 5:19; 1 Chron. 29:11-12) as well as a mediatorial,

theocratic kingdom (a reign of God on earth). The theocratic rule of man finds its final fulfillment when Messiah rules and reigns (Isa. 7:14; 11:1-5; Jer. 23:5) at His return (Psa. 50:3-5; Zech. 2:10-13; Mal. 3:1-4) in a worldwide spiritual kingdom with Jerusalem as the capitol (Isa. 2:4; 11:4-5; Jer. 33:14-17).

Dan. 2:44-45 Daniel had a vision of a metallic image and the parts of this image refer to four earthly kingdoms: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome. At the end of these kingdoms, God will set up an earthly kingdom that shall never be destroyed. This will take place at the second advent of Christ when the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled (Luke 21:24).

Dan. 7:27. Daniel saw a vision of four beasts referring to the four ancient powers (see above) and then God will destroy the last beast at the second advent and establish an earthly kingdom which will be given to the people of God.

Isa. 2:1-4. The kingdom will be worldwide with Jerusalem the capitol.

New Testament Concept of the Kingdom

All Dispensationalists believe that Christ offered a literal earthly Davidic kingdom to Israel in the New Testament; it was rejected and the earthly kingdom was postponed. Dispensationalists disagree as to the type of kingdom that is in existence after the rejection of the earthly, Messianic kingdom.

Earthly, Messianic Kingdom Offered. John the Baptist announced the earthly, Messianic kingdom to Israel as near (Matt. 3:1-2) and Christ preached the same message (Matt. 4:17). If the nation would repent and trust the King (Christ), they could have the kingdom. When John and Christ came, they did not have to define the kingdom message to the Jews and they understood clearly that He was offering the earthly, Messianic kingdom. When Christ sent out the seventy, he told them only to go to Israel and preach, “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 10:5-7).

Strict Dispensationalists make a clear-cut distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, they say the kingdom of heaven (Messianic kingdom) was rejected by the Jews but the kingdom of God was still in force. Modified Dispensationalists believe that the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven are one kingdom and refer to the earthly, Messianic kingdom in both the Gospels and the Epistles.

Earthly, Messianic Kingdom Rejected: The earthly, Messianic kingdom was near to the Jews because the King was in their midst. The kingdom was not in them but in their midst because the King was physically present (Luke 17:21). But the Jewish religious leaders rejected their Messiah and King in Matthew 12: 23-28 by stating His ministry was not of God but of the Devil. The leaders rejected in Matthew 12 but the nation officially rejected in John 19:14, 15 when they said, “We have no King but Caesar.” They rejected the King and His kingdom.

Earthly, Messianic Kingdom Postponed: In Matthew 13, after rejection of the King and kingdom, Christ began to talk about a new form of the kingdom - the mysteries of the kingdom (Matt. 13:10-11). Christ’s point is that now there will be a mystery form of the kingdom with the King rejected and soon to be absent. The Parables of Matthew 13 tell us about this new, spiritual form of the kingdom until Christ returns in His second advent.

The Modified Dispensationalist does not believe in a mystery form of the kingdom but believes in mysteries about the Messianic kingdom. He agrees there is a present operation of the kingdom in this world but that kingdom can only be said to have a *de jure* existence, for its actual establishment upon earth is in abeyance until the second advent of Christ. Christians are “in” the kingdom and acknowledge the King even though the kingdom will not be set up until the Second Advent. Christians (the church) experience the blessings and spiritual power of the kingdom now and will have a part in the kingdom later.

Theological Problems

Compartmentalizes Scripture. Dispensationalists assume that much of the Old Testament and some of the New Testament are not for Christians but only Jews. The Sermon on the Mount, the Lord's Prayer, Matthew 24-25 and Revelation 6:19 are not for the church but for Israel because these passages deal with Israel and not the church. Some go so far as to say the Great Commission, baptism and the Lord's Table are not for Christians (Hyper Dispensationalists).

Distinguish Between Gospels Preached. The Dispensationalists must distinguish between "the gospel of the kingdom," and the gospel of salvation. To them the gospel of the kingdom refers to the good news of the coming King and His kingdom, which shall be proclaimed during the Tribulation by the Jewish remnant.

A Crown Before the Cross. Dispensationalists face the practical problem that if Christ offered a literal, earthly kingdom and Israel would have accepted it; the kingdom would have come in without the death of Christ. The crown would have come without the cross.

Bonafide Offer of the Kingdom. Could Christ honestly offer the kingdom to Israel knowing that the nation would reject and that the kingdom would not be set up until the Second Advent? The dispensationalists answer that this is no different than offering the children of Israel the land knowing that they would reject it, or offering salvation to the non-elect.

Rejection of a Messianic Kingdom. It is very difficult to prove the earthly, Messianic kingdom was rejected in Matthew 12. This is an induction rather than a deduction. It is at best an assumption rather than a fact.

AMILLENNIALISM

Definition

Kingdom (*basileia*) means a reign or rule with a realm to reign over. The Amil accepts a spiritual kingdom because he believes Christ Himself interpreted the kingdom spiritually.

Old Testament Concept of the Kingdom

God historically fulfilled the earthly aspects of the kingdom to Israel but the eternal, spiritual kingdom was the kingdom of significance in the Old Testament. Daniel 2:44 and 7:27 refer to a spiritual kingdom that Christ set up in his first advent and Isaiah 2:1-4 refers to either the church now or the eternal state.

New Testament Concept of the Kingdom

John the Baptist, Christ and the disciples preached a spiritual kingdom, which was entered into by faith. Christ interpreted the kingdom to give it a spiritual meaning. It is entered into by repentance (Matt. 4:17), and by the new birth (John 3:3). This kingdom is not of this world (John 18: 36) and it is within men who acknowledge the kingship of Christ (Luke 17:21).

This kingdom is not carnal things but righteousness, peace and joy (Rom. 14:17) and the believer has already entered this spiritual kingdom (Col. 1:13; Heb. 12: 28; 1 Thess. 2:12; 1 Cor. 4:20). The whole concept of the kingdom is soteriological rather than mediatorial.

The Amil believes that the Lord Jesus took the disciples aside in Matthew 13 to correct their erroneous interpretation of an earthly, Messianic kingdom.

Theological Problems

An Amil completely ignores the fact that the Old Testament teaches an earthly kingdom.

An Amil ignores the teaching that there is an earthly aspect to the kingdom in the New Testament.

Much of the Old Testament is spiritualized so as to give moral and ethical teaching to the Christian but the literal is ignored.

POSTMILLENNIALISM

Definition

Kingdom is a rule or reign of a king over his kingdom. The kingdom is the rule and reign of Christ over and in the church on the earth. The kingdom is spiritual but it will find an outward manifestation through the church in the last days.

Old Testament Concept of the Kingdom

Old Testament prophecies on the kingdom are to be taken literally in that they are earthly but they are to be fulfilled to the church, that is, spiritual Israel.

Old Testament Prophecies on an Earthly Kingdom: Psa. 86:9; 22:27; 2:8; 47:2-8; 72:7-11, 19; 110:1; Heb. 2:7; Isa. 11:9; 45:22; Dan. 7:27.

Old Testament Prophecies Fulfilled in the Church: Isa. 2:2-3 cf. Heb. 12:22; Amos 9: 11-12 cf. Acts 15:17.

New Testament Redemptive Concept of the Kingdom

The “world” is the object of Christ’s redemption (1 John 2:2; John 3:16-17; 1 John 4:14; John 1:29; 4:42; 8:12, 2 Cor. 5: 19). The Great Commission is to convert the world not just to witness to it (Matt. 28:18-20). Christ’s work of redemption truly has as its object the people of the entire world and the kingdom is to become universal.

A Postmil takes much more seriously the concept of a kingdom on earth than does the Amil.

Theological Problems

The world does not seem to be getting better and better (at least spiritually).

The Old Testament prophecies are not taken far enough.

HISTORIC PREMILLENNIALISM

Definition

Kingdom may be a rule and a realm, but the secondary and derived meaning is just a rule - authority to rule, the sovereignty of the king. A king may have a right to rule without a realm to rule over. The kingdom is the right to rule, which will ultimately include a realm to rule over.

Old Testament Concept of the Kingdom

Historic Premils generally take a very literal approach to the kingdom promises and believe that the Old Testament teaches a literal, earthly Messianic kingdom will come to earth with Christ ruling over this kingdom.

Some Historic Premils would see many of the passages of the Old Testament as referring to the eternal state rather than to the earthly millennium. For instance, Isaiah 65:17ff is often referred to by Dispensationalists as millennial because it mentions death (65:20) and there will be no death in the eternal state. The historic Premil puts this in the eternal state because it states that this occurs when God creates “new heavens and a new earth.” The idea of death is merely figurative language.

Another instance is Isaiah 11. Some historic Premils believe that a change in animal behavior obviously represents the lifting of the Adamic curse, which produced such a state to begin with. Yet the curse is not lifted until the end of the earthly millennium according to the chronology of Rev. 20. It would be hard to have sin and rebellion, on the scale of the Gog-Magog affair after the curse is lifted.

New Testament Concept of the Kingdom

Historic Premils believe that Christ did not offer the earthly, Davidic kingdom to Israel but offered a spiritual, soteriological kingdom. Christ will yet establish His kingdom on earth at His second advent and then the Old Testament promises will be fulfilled literally. They hold that the kingdom is present and future.

One Gospel and One Kingdom. Historic Premils believe the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God to be the same. They also believe “the gospel of the kingdom,” “the gospel of the kingdom of God,” “the gospel of the grace of God” and “the everlasting gospel” all refer to the same message. The context must determine whether the “kingdom” refers to the present kingdom, the millennial kingdom or the eternal kingdom.

Christ and the Disciples Offered a Spiritual Kingdom. John the Baptist (Matt. 3:2), Christ (Matt. 4:17, 23; Luke 4:43) and the disciples (Matt. 10:7; Luke 10:9) preached repentance and a spiritual kingdom which was to be accepted by faith. Christ offered the soteriological blessings of the future kingdom to the Jews and to the world.

Christ did not offer the earthly Davidic kingdom. If He had, the Jews would have accepted Him because they conceived of a reigning Messiah who would be a political hero to overthrow the yoke of Rome. Christ offered the Jews something they misunderstood and misinterpreted. He did not offer them the sort of kingdom they wanted. The Jews were not looking for a suffering Messiah; that is why the cross is an offense to the Jew even today (1 Cor. 1:23). But Christ had to suffer before He could reign, and the spiritual power and blessings of the future kingdom were to be manifested before the actual kingdom would be set up.

Jesus did not offer to the Jews the earthly kingdom any more than he offered himself to them as their glorious, earthly King. Here we may take our stand on firm ground. It has been affirmed that “. . . Israel had never dreamed of a kingdom apart from the presence and power of the expected King.” However, Jesus did not present Himself to Israel as the David King, as Israel interpreted that kingship. He was the King indeed. Matthew makes this clear as can be. But he came not on a throne of glory, but “meek, riding upon an ass” (Zech. 9:9). “This explicit as to the manner of Christ’s offer of Himself as His first advent, is not to be confused with His resistless coming as their Messiah in power and great glory at His second advent.” This is precisely the key to the solution of the problem. The coming of the Messiah was to be twofold. He was to come in meekness, in humility, to suffer and to die; he was also to come in power and glory to judge and to reign. In the same way, God’s kingdom was first to come to men in a spiritual sense, as the Savior-King comes in meekness to suffer and die, defeating Satan and bringing into the sphere of God’s kingdom a host of people who are redeemed from the kingdom of Satan and of sin; and subsequently it is to be manifested in power and glory as the King returns to judge and reign. (Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God*)

Kingdom is a Present Fact. The kingdom is entered into by the new birth (John 3:3) and is received in the present (Luke 16:16; Mark 10:15) and is entered into now (Matt. 21:31). Christians are in Christ’s kingdom now (Col. 1:13; Eph 5:5). We are already in Christ’s kingdom positionally and will one day be there actually.

The kingdom is said to be “in” true followers of Christ (Luke 17:21). In this context, Christ is addressing unsaved Pharisees so how could it mean a spiritual kingdom within people? Dispensationalists say this must be interpreted “in the midst of you,” indicating since the King was present, His kingdom was in their midst.

The historic premil says the Greek word *mesos* must be translated “inside, within,” and it is used only one other time in the New Testament, in James 3:4, where the meaning is definitely “within.”

Having established the meaning as “within you,” what is the force of the expression in our Lucian passage? Let it be clear first of all that the emphasis in the Greek is not upon you, that is, it does not say that the kingdom is within the particular Pharisees to whom Christ is speaking. The emphasis is rather upon within. What the Lord is saying in fact, as the context clearly shows, is that the kingdom He was speaking about was not an external earthly affair but an inner spiritual one; it does not come with outside things, it is within you. When speaking at a mission in one occasion, I was stressing the possibility of the victorious life after Christ has been accepted as Saviour and used the expression “Christ lives in you.” No one understood me to mean those unsaved men as they were before me. This is a normal use of language that practically every preacher follows at some time or other. (H. J. Heydt, “Messianic Prophecy,” American Board of Missions to the Jews)

The spiritual blessings and power of the future kingdom are experienced by the Christian now (Rom. 14:17).

The kingdom is like a seed sown in the hearts of men (Mark 4:3ff) and the scribes were said not to be far from the kingdom Mark 12:34).

The kingdom came in a spiritual sense because Satan, who is the god of this world, is being defeated (Matt. 12:23-30 cf. John 12:31, 16.11). Matthew 12:28 says, “The kingdom of God has come upon you.” The Greek word is *ephthasen* which may mean “has arrived.” The kingdom has come in spiritual power but not in actual, total fulfillment.

Christ’s kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36) because in the present age it is a spiritual *manifestation* but at the Second Advent it will become an earthly manifestation.

The Kingdom Is a Future Reality:

1. Christians shall yet enter the kingdom (Matt. 13:41, 43, 2 Pet. 1:11).
2. The kingdom will have a future earthly manifestation (Matt. 8:11).
3. The kingdom has to do with the governments of the nations of the world (Rev. 11:15).
4. The kingdom will be given to God’s children in the future (Luke 12:32).
5. The earthly manifestation of the kingdom shall be finally offered up to the Father by Christ (1 Cor. 15:24).

Conclusion

True believers (Christians) are positionally in the future kingdom now and because of this they experience the spiritual power and blessing of the future kingdom to some degree. The fullness of blessing and power can only be experienced when the kingdom comes in full manifestation at the Second Advent. Every Christian acknowledges Christ as King and permits Him to take over the life and believe he shall be with Christ in His future kingdom, whether it be an earthly or eternal state.

It is quite wrong to understand such passages as these to mean that the kingdom of God has come in the sense that the fullness of the kingdom has come and that there will therefore be no future coming of the kingdom. . . . The kingdom as the realm in which the will of God is everywhere perfectly done is in the New Testament consistently future. Yet there is a sense in which one may say that the kingdom of God has come in that the powers of the future kingdom have already come into history and into human experience through the supernatural ministry of the Messiah, which has effected the defeat of Satan. Men may now experience the reality of the reign of God. In the future eschatological kingdom Satan will be utterly destroyed, cast into a lake of fire and brimstone (Rev. 20:10) that men may be freed from every influence of evil. However, God’s people need not wait for the coming of the future kingdom to know what it means to be delivered from Satanic power. The presence of Christ on earth had for its purpose the defeat of Satan, his binding, so that God’s power may be a vital reality in the experience of those who yield to God’s reign by becoming the disciples of Jesus. In Christ, the kingdom, in the form of its power, has come among men. (Ladd, *Crucial Questions*)

Theological Problems

A Historic Premil accepts a spiritual kingdom until he comes to Rev. 20: 1-6 and then declares there will be an earthly, Davidic kingdom as stated in the Old Testament. This position is not just true of Historic Premil for even some Jews (Christian Dispensationalists) today hold this position.

What would have happened if the whole Jewish nation had responded to Jesus Christ by faith? Would not the earthly kingdom have been set up? No! The reason for this is that Christ did not offer a literal, earthly, Davidic kingdom. The Romans would have turned against Christ and crucified Him and the Jewish multitudes probably would have expected Him to set up the kingdom then, but this was not his Man (Acts 1:6-8). The Jews would still have to go into the world to preach the gospel and wait for Christ to set up an earthly kingdom at His Second Advent. Of course, this is all just speculation because it did not happen that way.