

THE COMING KINGDOM, PART XXII

by Andy Woods

Today's evangelical world believes that the church is experiencing the Messianic kingdom. Note the words of Russell Moore, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberties Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention: “The locus of the kingdom of God in this age is within the church, where Jesus rules as king. As we live our lives together, we see the transforming power of the gospel and the in breaking of the future kingdom.”¹ To address this type of confusion, we began a study chronicling what the Bible teaches about the kingdom. In this series, the biblical teaching on the kingdom has been surveyed from Genesis to Revelation. We have noted thus far that what the Old Testament predicts concerning an earthly kingdom was offered to Israel during Christ's First Advent. Yet, the nation rejected this kingdom offer leading to the kingdom's postponement. In the interim, the kingdom is future as God now pursues an interim program that includes the church.

In addition, we began scrutinizing a series of texts that "kingdom now" theologians routinely employ in order to argue that the kingdom is a present reality in order to show that none of these passages, when rightly understood, teach a present, spiritual form of the kingdom. We began with the use of alleged "kingdom now" texts in the life of Christ, such as "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; 10:5-7), "seek first His kingdom" (Matt. 6:33), "the kingdom of heaven suffers violence" (Matt. 11:12), and “the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28). We also began an analysis of Luke 17:20-21, which represents a key proof text utilized by "kingdom now" theologians. These verses say, "Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God was coming, He answered them and

said, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here *it is!*' or, 'There *it is!*' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst.'"

We noted that it is appropriate to dispute the common rendering, "the kingdom of God is within you." Christ was conversing with unbelieving Pharisees. Craven observes, "The supposition that He indicated an *existing* Basileia...implies that it was set up in (or among) the Pharisees."² Moreover, we explained that the offer of the kingdom framework, as discussed in prior articles, is sufficient for handling these verses. Christ's presence manifested kingdom realities that could also have become tangible for the nation had they fulfilled their obligation of enthroning their king (Deut. 17:15). In other words, the presence of the kingdom in Christ could not become a reality for all because of the nation's rejection of the kingdom offer.

THE KINGDOM IS A FUTURISTIC CERTAINTY

When we look at the larger context of Luke 17:20-21 found in Luke 17:20-37, it becomes apparent that Christ was speaking of a future, rather than a present, manifestation of the kingdom. By the time Christ uttered the words found in Luke 17:20-21, it is apparent that first-century Israel was not going to accept the offer of the kingdom since the nation was in the process of rejecting her king. In Luke 17:22, 25, Christ noted, "The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it...But first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation." Consequently, in this section, Christ began to outline how the future kingdom will one day come to the earth. The future establishment of the kingdom will be an instantaneous event rather than a prolonged, gradual process (Dan. 2:35, 44). This instantaneous establishment of the future kingdom explains why Christ said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed." Observation of signs is only pertinent if an event is gradual rather than something instantaneous. Thus, once the

kingdom comes people will not say, "Look, here *it is!*" or, 'There *it is!*' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:20-21). This instantaneous, futuristic arrival of the kingdom is corroborated by the surrounding context, which analogizes Christ's Second Coming to sudden flashing of lightning (Luke 17:23-24), and to the flood waters that rapidly came upon the world in Noah's day (Luke 17:20-28), as well as to the fire and brimstone that came suddenly upon Sodom and Gomorrah in the days of Lot (Luke 17:29-33). Thus, unbelievers will be caught off guard by these events as they are then ushered into immediate judgment (Luke 17:34-36). This overall futuristic context is most likely why the future tense of the verb is employed in Christ's statement, "nor *will they say*, 'Look...'" (Luke 17:21; italics added). Here, the word translated "will they say" is the future tense verb of the Greek word *lego*. Thus, after examining the futuristic context in Luke 17:20-37, Craven appropriately asks the following question concerning the announcement of the kingdom given in Luke 17:20-21: "Does it not become manifest that this passage, so far from teaching the doctrine of a present establishment of the Basileia, must be numbered amongst those that connect the establishment with the Second Advent?"³

If the arrival of the kingdom is indeed a future reality, then why did Christ in Luke 17:21 appear to speak of the kingdom as a present reality when He used the present tense of the verb *eimi* to proclaim "For behold, the kingdom of God *is* in your midst" (italics added)? At least two reasons can be offered to explain Christ's use of the present tense here. *First*, because the Pharisees asked the initial question in the present tense, it stands to reason that Christ would also answer their question in the present tense. The opening question in Luke 17:20 says, "Now having been questioned by the Pharisees as to when the kingdom of God *was coming*" (italics added). Here, the word translated "was coming" is the present tense form of the verb *erchomai*.

Thus, the Pharisees' present tense question sets the proper foundation for Christ's present tense answer. Craven well explains this congruity:

In the E. V. there is a difference in tense between the question of the Pharisees and the answer of Jesus—they asking, when the Basileia *should* come, and He answering, it *cometh* not with observation, it *is* within you—which necessarily implies a declaration of then existing establishment. This difference is altogether unauthorized—both the question and the answer are in the present; the question of the Pharisees should be translated “when cometh (*erchetai*) the kingdom of God?” The question was asked in the vivid, dramatic present; it manifestly had reference to the future; it would be in defiance of every conceivable law of language to suppose that our Lord, in following the lead of His questioners, intended to indicate a different tense. The question and the answer are but illustrations of that law proper to all languages, but pre-eminently to the Greek...⁴

Second, biblical language often describes future events with the present tense in order to indicate their ultimate certainty. Because God is infinite and therefore not bound by time the way finite man is (Ps. 90:4; 2 Pet. 3:8), to Him, the future is the present. In other words, His infinitude allows Him to express future events as though they were present realities because He sees them as such. For example, Romans 8:29-30 says, "For those whom He *foreknew*, He also *predestined* to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the first-born among many brethren; and these whom He *predestined*, He also called; and these whom He *called*, He also *justified*; and these whom He *justified*, He also *glorified*" (italics mine). Here Paul lays out the various phases of the believer's salvation. Notice that our future glorification is depicted in the same past tense as our past predestination, calling, and justification. In other words, the believer's future glory is just as certain as anything God has done in the believer's past. After all, He is not bound by time and therefore sees this future as though it were a present reality. For this same reason, God promised Joshua victory over Jericho before any battle had

actually been fought (Josh. 6:2). God, who can see the future clearly since He is not bound by time, already saw Joshua's ultimate victory.

In the same way, in Luke 17:21, Christ uses the present tense to describe the kingdom not to depict its present, spiritual arrival but rather to articulate its futuristic certainty. Craven explains:

...pre-eminently to the Greek, by which a *certain* future may be represented by a verb in the present; illustrations may be found, Matt. 26:2 (after two days *is* the feast of the Passover, and the Son of Man *is* betrayed, *etc.*); 1 Cor. 15:42–44 (it is sown in corruption, it *is* [in the *future* resurrection] raised in incorruption)...To the conclusion that the language of our Lord must be understood as having reference to the future, it may also be remarked, we are shut up by the following considerations: The supposition...disconnects His words from the immediately-following address to the disciples, whilst the contrary supposition brings them into manifest and beautiful connection therewith, and with His other utterances...In this connection may be considered that class of passages which are regarded as teaching the doctrine of a present Basileia from their use of *present* verb when mentioning it. (Reference is not now had to those in which there is aught *in the context* that apparently requires the hypothesis of a present kingdom—...These passages are: all those parables which thus refer to the Basileia, Matt. 13:31, 38, 44, 45, 47, *etc.*; also Matt. 11:11; Rom. 14:17. These, it is admitted, are all consistent with the hypothesis of a present kingdom; but, under the rule set forth under the preceding head, they are all grammatically consistent with that of a *certain* future establishment.⁵

(To Be Continued...)

¹ Justin Taylor, "An Interview with Russell Moore," www.thegospelcoalition.org.

² E.R. Craven, "Excursus on the Basileia," in *Revelation of John*, ed. John Lange (New York: Scribner, 1874), 96.

³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 96-97.