The Kingdom Of God Is Already Here - Peter and Paul Said So (Kingdom Chronicles 3)

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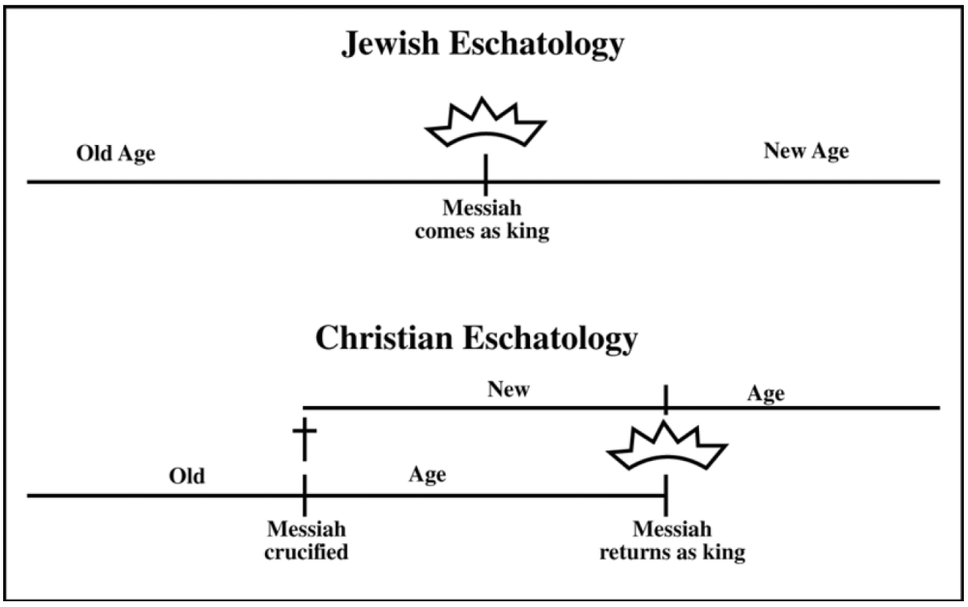
In the last several blog posts, we have briefly overviewed the notion of "the Kingdom of God" in the Bible. In the last post, we zoomed in on the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels about the Kingdom as a reality that was present in his person and ministry. But how did the early church respond to this teaching of Jesus about an already/not yet kingdom of God? Did they modify his message later? Or did they continue to proclaim what he had claimed? In this post, we briefly examine the notion of the "already" element as seen in the NT outside of the Gospels.

The Present Kingdom in Acts-Revelation

As a reminder and review, it will help us again to note Blomberg's chart (which is the same basically as that drawn by George Eldon Ladd before that, and by Geerhardus Vos before that) which contrast the common Jewish expectation about the Kingdom with the teaching of Jesus about the Kingdom. The Christian notion of the Kingdom of God is that it is both already present, but not yet consummated. That Christians live in the "overlap" between the ages. The Kingdom is *inaugurated*, but not yet *consummated*.



The Present Kingdom in Luke-Acts

We could trace the idea of the "already" Kingdom in Acts in a number of different ways. Inaugurated Eschatology shows up all through Acts, in both Luke's employment of fulfillment of the OT themes, and in the preaching/speeches of the Apostles and the early church. But what I want to talk about for a moment is the clearest way that the "already" of the Kingdom shows up. This is the promised Eschatological "Gift of the Spirit."

It was the common understanding and prophecy of the OT that the mark of the New Age to come would be the dispensing of the Holy Spirit to *all* God's people. Rather than the partial and temporary giving of the Spirit to select individuals, in the coming age, the Spirit would be dispersed to all (see Joel 2:28-32; Is. 32:15; 44:3; Ezekiel 36:25-27; 39:29; Zech 12:10; etc.). This was the eager expectation of the Jewish people. Which is why when John the Baptist appeared, claiming the Spirit-Bearer was here, and was about to pour the Spirit out, it excited such eschatological fervor. Luke recounts this in Luke 3:16-17, and this becomes the key text for him.

"John answered them all, saying, 'I baptize you with water,
but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

His winnowing fork is in his hand,
to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn,
but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'"
(Luke 3:16-17)

Luke will refer back to this promise of John again and again, because this tied it all together for him. The Messiah was here. How do we know? Because the mark of the New Age was the Spirit, and Jesus had come to pour out the Spirit. So in Luke 24:49, the disciples are told to wait for the power of the Spirit, referring back to this promise. Acts 1:4-5 picks this up again.

In Acts 2, at Pentecost, the promise is realized (2:4), and Peter declares that Joel's long awaited prophecy has finally come (Acts 2:16-21, 33). He urges them to repent and believe. Why? That they may, "receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (2:38) because the promised Spirit had finally come, and was for all (2:39). Thus, it is clear that "the last days" (2:17) and "those days" (2:18), that is, the second age, the time of God's rule, the Kingdom of God, has finally come. Craig Keener explains,

> "The Spirit as an eschatological gift attested clearly that the eschatological time had dawned, and functioned as a primary apologetic tool for the early Christians (who seem to have explained the interval between comings partly by citing Ps 110:1 and the model of a salvific interval between redemption and inheritance in the exodus, e.g., Rom 8:23; Eph 1:14). If its unique possession of the Torah187 or of prophetic endowment identified Israel as the elect in some other early Jewish circles, the Jesus movement's distinctive possession of the prophetic Spirit could be used to identify Christians as the elect remnant.189 Peter explained that this marvelous power to speak in other tongues … was the outward sign of the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy that God would pour out his Holy Spirit on all his people. In Joel this promise was associated with the Day of the Lord; Peter asserts that this event has now occurred in history. It results from the fact that God had exalted the crucified Jesus, had enthroned him at his right hand, thus inaugurating his messianic reign; and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon his people was nothing less than the blessing of the messianic age. (Keener, C. S. (2012–2013). Acts: An Exegetical Commentary & 2: Introduction and 1:1–14:28 (Vol. 1, p. 880).)

In Acts 10-11, in the Cornelius episode, Luke again takes us back to this reality. The Holy Spirit comes upon Gentiles, entirely at God's discretion (10:44). And this immediately convinces even the incredibly stubborn Peter that the Gentiles are now fully part of the people of God, because they have received the promised eschatological gift of the Spirit. The New Age has come not only to Jews, but to Gentiles (Acts 10:44-47).

"While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. 45 And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. 46 For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, 47 "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days."
(Acts 10:44-48).

When Peter goes to try to convince the Jerusalem church of this astounding new development, he points to the pouring out of the Spirit, and goes back to the promise of Luke 3:16-17 again. The New Age has dawned even for Gentiles, because he fell on them too (11:15), repeating Pentecost for them (11:15b). This immediately made Peter recall John's promise, and "remember the word of the Lord" (11:16) that he would give the Spirit. If Gentiles have been given the Spirit, they too have entered the New Age of salvation (11:17-18).

"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" 18 When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."
(Acts 11:15-18)

In Acts 13, Luke again brings up the promise of Luke 3:16. Paul jumps in his sermon straight over 1,000

years of Jewish history to John's preaching of "the promise" (Acts 13:23-24).

"Before his coming, John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. 25 And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but behold, after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.'"
(Ac 13:24–25).

When the issue of circumcision comes sharply to the fore in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, what does Peter look to in order to determine the issue? Simple, he goes back to Luke 3:16, noting that God "bore witness" to Gentile inclusion because he gave them the Spirit that marked the New Age (Acts 15:8-9).

Finally, when the episode of the Samaritan disciples of John comes up, in Acts 19:1-7, Luke once again takes us back to the promise of Luke 3:16 explicitly (Acts 19:4). And so they too enter the New Age, for they too receive the eschatological gift of the Spirit being poured out on them (Acts 19:6).

Darrell Bock points out the importance of this Luke 3:16/New Age/Spirit connection when he writes, "Again, the new era comes when Messiah brings the promise of the new era, the Spirit. For Luke, this is the hope of the presence and Kingdom of God providing the dynamic for God to rule in his people. It is what Acts 11:18 called "life." So this string of texts tied to Luke 3:16 shows not only the importance of these verses for Luke's teaching of the Spirit; it also summarizes the major function the Spirit has in Luke-Acts: enablement for witness and life that shows the new era has come through the Christ." (Bock, D. L. (2012). A Theology of Luke and Acts: Biblical Theology of the New Testament.

Tom Schreiner explains well;

> The gift of the Spirit signals the arrival of the eschaton. According to the prophet Joel, God pledged to pour out his Spirit (Joel 2:28). Joel anticipated the day of the Lord, when Yahweh would reverse the fortunes of Israel by vindicating his people and punishing the nations that opposed Israel (Joel 3). Those who curse Israel would be cursed, and those who bless Israel would be blessed, in accordance with God's promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3). Joel pointed forward to the day when Jerusalem would become holy, and the land would burst with fruitfulness as wine and milk flow in abundance and a fountain springs up from the Lord's house (Joel 3:17–18). We note again here the language of a new creation. God will avenge himself on nations that resisted him, whereas Jerusalem will become a peaceful habitation.
> Schreiner, T. R. (2008). New Testament theology: magnifying God in Christ (p. 103).

How do we know that the Kingdom is present now? For Luke, the answer is simple. The Spirit has been given. And this is the evidence that the New Age has dawned.

The Present Kingdom in Paul

Paul picks up the same major point made by Luke. For Paul, the Eschatological Gift of the Spirit is final and decisive proof that the second age has come, and that we are now living in some sense in the Kingdom already come, though not yet consummated. Tom Schreiner explains,

> The Spirit is the emblem that the promises of the coming age are realized. Joel promises that God will pour out his Spirit on his people (Joel 2:28–32). In Ezekiel the fulfillment of God's promises is coordinated with the outpouring of the Spirit (Ezek 11:19–20; 36:26–27). The new exodus of Isaiah is linked with the pouring out of God's Spirit (Is 44:3). When Paul refers to all of God's promises being fulfilled in Christ, the Spirit is included among those promises (2 Cor 1:20, 22). Indeed, the anointing in 2 Corinthians 1:21 is probably a reference to the Spirit. In any case, the Spirit is clearly in view in 2

> Corinthians 1:22: God "sealed us and gave us the down payment of the Spirit in our hearts"...The down payment of the Spirit expresses the "already but not yet" character of God's work. The Spirit as God's down payment verifies and guarantees that he will complete the salvific process inaugurated. (Schreiner, T. R. (2006). Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology (pp. 261–262).

Paul's basic paradigm in all his ethical exhortation is the *already/not yet* kingdom. This shines through in his movement between indicative/imperative. Paul doesn't often use the language of "kingdom," but the theme still pervades his writings. When he does use the word, he often speaks of the Kingdom as yet future (I Cor. 6:9-10; 15:24, 50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; II Tim. 4:1, 18). But he also sometimes clearly speaks of the Kingdom as a present reality. Thus Paul can directly say that The Father has already delivered us from "the domain of darkness" (The Old Age), and has already transferred us into "the Kingdom of his beloved son" (Col. 1:13). Further, in Rom. 14:17, he makes clear that the power of "the Kingdom of God" is already at work.

Paul sometimes uses the language of "two ages" that reflects Jewish thinking (see the chart again), but he follows Jesus in understanding that the new age has in some sense dawned before the old age has passed. Thus, both "this age" and "the age to come" coexists in some way (Eph. 1:21). Satan is the god of this age (II Cor. 4:4) who leads the mockers of this age in their foolish wisdom (I Cor. 1:20; 2:6, 8; 3:18-20), so that the old age still persists. Yet for believers, "the end of the ages has come" already (I Cor. 10:11). And so we have already been "set free from the present age" (Gal. 1:4). This "present world" is passing away (I Cor. 7:29-31), and the old creation has already passed away, while the new age has already come (II Cor. 5:17). The promised blessing of Abraham (Is. 44:3), that is, the Spirit of God poured out on all nations, has become ours in Christ (Gal. 1:14). Even the new Jerusalem from above is ours through Christ (Gal. 4:26). Pauline scholar Tom Schreiner summarizes Paul's teaching on the Kingdom as being that, "Paul taught that Christians live in between the times inasmuch as the present evil age lingers, even as the new age has invaded history." Schreiner, T. R. (2008). New Testament theology: magnifying God in Christ (p. 98).

The Present Kingdom in Hebrews - Revelation

We will only glance over these uses, but in the remainder of the NT, the claim that the Kingdom is in some sense already present continues to be a prominent theme. The "last days" are here, and have arrived with Jesus (Heb. 1:2). Believers have already tasted, "the powers of the age to come" (Heb. 6:5). The New Covenant that promised a new heart and indwelling Spirit (Jer. 31) has come in Christ, making the Old Covenant obsolete (Heb. 8:6-13; 10:16-18). Christ's coming thus signaled, "the end of" the old ages, and the beginning of the new (Heb. 9:26). The promised reign of the Messiah promised in Psalm 110 has come with Jesus (Heb. 1:3, 13; 10:12), who has been crowned as King (Heb. 2:9). There was an eschatological rest promised to the people of God, prefigured in the Sabbath. And that rest, while in some sense not yet ours (Heb. 4:1,6) has also in some sense become ours already "today" (Heb. 4:3, 7). In James, although we await the future kingdom, we are already "the firstfruits" of it by virtue of our new birth (James 1:18), and we thus are already "heirs of the Kingdom" (James 2:5).

Peter emphasizes the future Kingdom for his suffering readers, (for example, in II Peter 3:1-13), but still, the age which the prophets predicted and longed for, marked by the gift of the Spirit, has already come to us (I Peter 1:10-11). We live in light of the end becase, "the end of all things is at hand." (I Pet. 4:7). So the "last times" have arrived for us with Jesus (II Pet. 1:20). The transfiguration was predicted to be a manifestation of the already come Kingdom (Matt. 16:28+17:1-13; Mark 9:1+9:2-9; Luke 9:27+9:28-36). And Peter reiterates that he was "an eyewitness of his majesty" when he saw this present manifestation of the Kingdom (II Pet. 1:16-18). Even in Revelation, where so much of the focus is on the "future" element of the Kingdom, John still claims that the Kingdom has already come, for, God has already made us to be a "Kingdom" (Rev. 1:5) of priests.

A Concluding Word

When we look carefully at the data in the NT, it becomes abundantly clear that the NT writers follow the teachings of Jesus. They reshaped their understanding of "the two ages" in such a way that they saw themselves as living in both ages at once. The Kingdom is still future, but it has already broken into the present. And we have received the blessings of the future age. We now live the life of the future even in the midsts of the pains of the present. We are marked out as a people by the presence of the Spirit of God, the harbinger of the new age. And we spread the message wide and far that this Kingdom, with all its power over disease, demons, and even death, can come to all who will follow Jesus in repentance and faith. George Ladd helpfully summarizes for us;

> There are a number of explicit statements in the New Testament, as well as the basic structure of New Testament theology as a whole, which compel us to conclude that the blessings of The Age to Come remain no longer exclusively in the future but have become objects of present experience in This Age. Hebrews 6:5 speaks of those who "tasted … the powers of the age to come." The Age to Come is still future, but we may taste the powers of that Age. Something has happened by virtue of which that which belongs to the future has become present. The powers of The Age to Come have penetrated This Age. While we still live in the present evil Age and while Satan is still the god of This Age, we may taste the powers of The Coming Age. Now a taste is not a seven-course banquet. We still look forward to the glorious consummation and fulfillment of that which we have only tasted. Yet a taste is real. It is more than promise; it is realization; it is experience. "Taste and see that the Lord is good." We have "tasted the powers of The Age to Come." …This overlapping of the two ages is fundamental to our understanding of the Biblical teaching of redemption…Such sayings lead to the conclusion that there is…a present overlapping of The Age to Come and This Age, and that we are now living "between the times." We are in fact caught up in the conflict of the ages.
>
> …What does this have to do with the Kingdom of God? Just this: the Kingdom of God belongs to The Age to Come. Yet The Age to Come has overlapped with This Age. We may taste its powers and thereby be delivered from This Age and no longer live in conformity to it. This new transforming power is the power of The Age to Come; it is indeed the power of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is future, but it is not only future. Like the powers of The Age to Come, the Kingdom of God has invaded this evil Age that men may know something of its blessings even while the evil Age goes on.
> Ladd, G. E. (1959). The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God (pp. 41–42).

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