The Kingdom in Matthew

By

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Introduction

The concept of the kingdom looms large on the pages of Scripture. Herman Ridderbos thought it so important that he declared: “The whole of the preaching of Jesus Christ and his apostles is concerned with the kingdom of God.”1 Robert Saucy echoes the point: “While mentioned far less often in the epistles, the ‘kingdom of God’ still qualifies as the summary of the apostolic teaching.”2 John Bright has even stated that “the concept of the Kingdom of God involves, in a real sense, the total message of the Bible.”3

Yet despite its importance, perhaps no other theme of the gospels has invoked greater confusion and controversy. There is no agreement on such basic questions as: What is the very nature of the kingdom of God? Is the kingdom of God different from the kingdom of heaven? Has the kingdom arrived? If not, why not and when will it come? What did Christ teach about the kingdom? These questions and more like them have engendered much debate in the theological world.

The purpose of this article is to evaluate the kingdom of God as it is espoused in the gospel of Matthew. I have chosen this topic for four basic reasons. First, attempting an overall survey of the kingdom would be a massive undertaking beyond my present capabilities. Second, Matthew is a hinge book, linking the Old and New Testaments, and so the presentation of the kingdom in the first gospel is extremely important. Third, the concept of the kingdom is prominently featured in Matthew; in fact, it is the theme of the book.4 Finally, although the advent of progressive dispensationalism has refocused attention on the kingdom of God, most of the detailed attention has been given to Luke.5

Chapter Two, lays a foundation for this study by providing a brief overview of various views of the kingdom from a systematic theology perspective. Chapter Three looks at the coming kingdom as it was announced by Jesus, and John before him, primarily in chapters 3 and 4 of Matthew. Chapter Four looks at the kingdom that “has come,” as espoused in Matthew chapters 12 and 13. Chapter Five looks at kingdom living, as Jesus explained it in chapters 5 through 7 (the Sermon on the Mount) and later in chapters 18 and 19. Chapter Six reviews the consummation of the kingdom when Jesus ushers in the millennial reign, as described principally in chapters 24 and 25. In Chapter Seven, I draw several modest conclusions from this study and suggest areas for additional study.

Chapter Two:
A Survey of the Kingdom of God in Theology

In this brief survey of the various theological viewpoints on the Kingdom of God, I examine first the critical-historical debate. I then turn to the three major views of Evangelicalism, the kingdom-future perspective of revised dispensationalism, the kingdom-now perspective of classical reformed or covenant theology, and the increasingly popular kingdom-already-but-not-yet perspective of historic premillennialism and progressive dispensationalism.

The Critical Historical Debate

Nineteenth century liberal theologians Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack believed that the kingdom of God is not something to be established in the future, but is now present in the form of the “brotherhood of man,” the infinite value of the individual soul, and the ethic of love. To them, the apocalyptic element in Jesus’s teaching was the “husk” that contained the “kernel” of his real message of love. Hence, the predominant liberal view was that the kingdom of which Jesus spoke was a present ethical kingdom.

Johannes Weiss rejected that view. He wrote in *The Preaching of Jesus about the Kingdom of God* that Jesus was “thoroughly eschatological, futuristic, and even apocalyptic in his outlook.” According to Weiss, Jesus expected the kingdom to come in the immediate future by a dramatic action of God. Thus, Jesus’s ethical commands (including the Sermon on the Mount) were interim rules in anticipation of the imminent kingdom, not rules of conduct given for all time. Albert Schweitzer picked up where Weiss left off. He interpreted the whole of Jesus’s preaching as being permeated with a conviction of the approaching kingdom. He called this interpretation a “consistent eschatology.” According to Schweitzer, a future heavenly kingdom was at the base of Jesus’s preaching even from the beginning of his ministry. However, in the end, in Schweitzer’s view, Jesus was traumatized by “the delay of the parousia” and he thus died in despair and disillusionment.

C.H. Dodd gave eschatology its next major reorientation. He believed the kingdom had already arrived, calling his system a ‘realized eschatology.’ According to Dodd, the kingdom is a transcendent order beyond time and space that has broken into history in the mission of Jesus.

The debate over “kingdom future” or “kingdom now” continues to rage. This is true in evangelical circles as well. The three views discussed below are representative.

Revised Dispensationalists—Thy Kingdom Come!

Revised dispensationalists have traditionally characterized the kingdom of God as consisting of an earthly theocratic kingdom promised to Israel in the Old Testament. It is the thousand year reign of Christ on earth. They believe that Jesus offered the kingdom to the Jews, but that Jesus’s own people rejected the offer, and so, instead of...
establishing the kingdom, Jesus postponed it until the second coming. In the meantime, he established the “mystery form” of the kingdom during the “inter-advent age,” in which “Christ rules spiritually in the hearts of believers without fulfilling the prophecies of the kingdom on earth.”¹⁵ As John Walvoord has stated:

Jesus had been offering the kingdom in the form of offering himself as the Messiah and King of Israel. This offer had been rejected, as God had anticipated, and ultimately this rejection would lead to the cross of Christ, which was part of God’s plan for the redemption of the world. On the divine side this was no change of plan, but on the human side it was a change of direction regarding fulfillment of the kingdom promise.¹⁶

Revised dispensationalists thus believe that the kingdom promised in the Old Testament (what I call the eschatological kingdom) will be established in the millennium at which time Israel will be converted and Jesus will sit on David’s throne. Both inauguration and consummation of the kingdom are future in orientation.

Revised dispensationalists have been particularly vigorous in proposing that the entirety of the eschatological kingdom of God will come in the future, as Jesus returns and ushers in the millennium. Charles Ryrie has emphatically declared that the kingdom is not the church, the body of Christ.¹⁷ Rather, the kingdom is future:

What would those people [the Jews of Jesus’s day] have understood the kingdom to be? The Messianic, Davidic kingdom on this earth in which the Jewish people would have a prominent place.¹⁸

The kingdom is “physical, glorious and powerful.”¹⁹

The gospel of Matthew factors prominently in the revised dispensational scheme of the kingdom. As Walvoord stated in his commentary on Matthew, the very purpose of the first gospel is to “explain[] why the prophecies relating to the kingdom of Christ on earth are delayed in fulfillment until the second coming.”²⁰ It “was designed to explain to the Jews, who had expected the Messiah when He came to be a conquering king, why instead Christ suffered and died, and why there was the resulting postponement of His triumph to His second coming.”²¹

Reformed Theology—Thy Kingdom Came (Mainly)!

Covenant theologians agree that Christ will return as He promised and that, when He does, He will bring in the fullness of the kingdom. Nevertheless, in contrast to revised dispensationalists, that is not their emphasis. They focus on the belief that the kingdom has already arrived. Charles Hodge is representative of this view. He said, with respect to the nature of the kingdom:

First, it is spiritual. That is, it is not of this world. It is not analogous to the other kingdoms which existed, or do still exist among men. It has a different origin and a different end. Human kingdoms are organized among men, under the providential government of God, for the promotion of the temporal well-being of society. The kingdom of Christ was organized immediately by God, for the promotion of religious objects. It is spiritual, or not of this world, moreover, because it has no power over the lives, liberty, or property of its members; and because all secular matters lie be-

¹⁷ Charles Ryrie, Dispensationalism, p. 97.
¹⁸ Ibid.
yond its jurisdiction. . . The kingdom of Christ, under the present dispensation, therefore, is not worldly even in the sense in which the ancient theocracy was of this world.\textsuperscript{22}

More recently, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote:

It is a kingdom which is to come, yes. But it is also a kingdom which has come. ‘The kingdom of God is among you’ and ‘within you’; the kingdom of God is in every true Christian. He reigns in the Church when she acknowledges Him truly. The kingdom has come, the kingdom is coming, the kingdom is yet to come. Now we must always bear that in mind. Whenever Christ is enthroned as King, the kingdom of God is come, so that, while we cannot say that He is ruling over all in the world at the present time, He is certainly ruling in that way in the hearts and lives of all His people.\textsuperscript{23}

The New Geneva Study Bible sharpens the contrast between reformed theology and revised dispensationalism. It states that “the kingdom or the reign of God is what the Old Testament prophets awaited: God’s display of His sovereignty in the redemption of His people.”\textsuperscript{24} Thus, with the death and resurrection of Jesus and the “spread of the good news to all nations,” the Old Testament promises of God “have been largely fulfilled for us, although we still await their complete realization when Christ returns in judgment.”\textsuperscript{25} “The kingdom came with Jesus and is known wherever the lordship of Jesus is acknowledged.”\textsuperscript{26}

**Historic Premillennialists and Progressive Dispensationalists:**
**Thy Kingdom—Already but Not Yet!**

A growing number of conservative theologians have refused to be boxed into either a “kingdom future” or a “kingdom now” emphasis. Beginning with Herman Ridderbos and George Ladd, these theologians embrace a “both/and” approach to the kingdom—postulating that the kingdom of God has already arrived in an inaugural form, but has not yet fully been consummated, and will not be until Christ’s second coming.\textsuperscript{27} This “already/not yet” approach has drawn proponents from dispensational, historic premillennial and reformed camps, so much so that Richard Gaffin has observed that it “has now virtually reached the status of consensus.”\textsuperscript{28} This position is well represented by New Testament commentators such as D.A. Carson and progressive dispensationalists such as Craig Blaising, Darryl Bock and Robert Saucy. As Bock stated:

> What emerges is a picture of a career [of Jesus] that comes in stages as different aspects of what the Old Testament promises are brought to fulfillment at different phases of Jesus’s work. One might characterize these phases as the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of Jesus’s career, or by reference to the kingdom, as the invisible and the visible kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{29}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24}New Geneva Study Bible (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995), note on Matthew 3:2 “kingdom of heaven.”
\item \textsuperscript{25}Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{26}“The Kingdom of God” in Ibid, p. 1638.
\item \textsuperscript{29}Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Christ," p. 46.
\end{itemize}
Progressive dispensationalists, in particular, claim that they offer “a corrective” to both revised dispensationalism and covenant theology because “covenant theologians of the past have tended to overemphasize the ‘already’ in their critiques of dispensationalism, while underemphasizing the ‘not yet.’”

The gospel of Matthew is an integral component of the “already/not yet” eschatological scheme (though Luke appears to have been emphasized in progressive dispensational writings because of the particular expertise of Darrell Bock with respect to the Luke/Acts texts). D.A. Carson declared in his seminal commentary on Matthew that a “constant theme” of the book is that “the kingdom came with Jesus and his preaching and miracles, it came with his death and resurrection, and it will come at the end of the age.”

As this short survey demonstrates, there are a wide variety of interpretations and explanations of the nature and purpose of the kingdom program of God. In 1958, J. Dwight Pentecost wrote that it was “almost impossible to make one’s way” through the maze of interpretations. This task has not gotten any easier in the forty subsequent years, and any interpreter must remain humble in attempting to maneuver the maze. Yet Pentecost pointed the way out when he observed that the truths relating to the kingdom will not be found in examining the writings of men but only by an inductive study of the Word of God. Accordingly, I now turn to the book of Matthew and its treatment of Jesus’s proclamation of the kingdom.

Chapter Three:
The Coming Kingdom Proclaimed

Matthew mentions the “kingdom of God” four times in his gospel. He mentions the “kingdom of heaven” thirty-three times. The term “kingdom” is used seventeen additional times. Obviously, then, God’s kingdom is a central theme of Matthew’s gospel. Although Walvoord and Vine believe the kingdom of heaven can be distinguished in some fashion from the kingdom of God, the vast majority of theologians recognize that the terms are synonymous.

The Coming Kingdom
Prophesied By John The Baptist

The kingdom of God is introduced to us in Matthew through the ministry of John the Baptist. John had two roles. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets. In his prophetic ministry, he strongly castigated the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders. He was also the herald who came before the king, announcing his impending presence. He was Jesus’s forerunner.

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30Ibid.
Matthew 3:2 encapsulates John’s basic message: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” This, our first encounter with the kingdom concept in Matthew, is a pivotal one. Here, at the beginning, we must grapple with several thorny foundational questions.

What did the term “kingdom” mean in the Old Testament?

It seems to me that much of the scholarly discussion of the kingdom of God is at such an abstract level as to be essentially meaningless. Alva McClain has well stated: “The great ideas of the Bible are concrete rather than abstract, and such terms as the kingdom of God are intended to convey meanings which are pertinent to actual situations in the world of reality with which men are somewhat familiar.”³⁸ My goal here is to examine the term “kingdom” in a concrete way.

It is customary to speak of a kingdom (basileia) as being made up of two component parts: [1] an authority to rule and [2] the realm or territory over which the king’s reign is exercised.³⁹ Vine, for example, speaks of the kingdom as being [1] sovereignty, royal power, dominion and [2] the territory or people over whom a king rules.⁴⁰ Strong similarly states that the kingdom consists of “royal power, kingship, dominion, rule” and “the territory subject to the rule of a king.”⁴¹ Bauer, Gingrich and Danker call the kingdom [1] “kingship, royal power, royal rule” and [2] “the territory ruled over by a king.”⁴²

This two-fold division undoubtedly stems from the Scriptural two-fold depiction of the kingdom. It is first of all viewed as a universal, eternal, timeless kingdom (1 Chron. 29:11-12; Ps. 10:16; 29:10).⁴³ The kingdom is second of all viewed as a “theocratic” or “mediatorial” kingdom.⁴⁴ These two perspectives are aspects of one holistic kingdom and should not be rigidly separated into separate kingdoms; indeed, Daniel 7:13-14, 27 combines them. Nevertheless, McClain has profitably written with respect to the latter:

The mediatorial kingdom may be defined tentatively as the rule of God through a divinely chosen representative who not only speaks and acts for God but also represents the people before God; a rule which has especial reference to the human race (although it finally embraces the universe); and its mediatorial ruler is always a member of the human race.⁴⁵

Old Testament theology can be summarized under the central theme of this mediatorial kingdom. From the beginning of history, God worked through appointed mediators in administering the mediatorial kingdom.⁴⁶ The mediatorial kingdom was in its incipience during the time of the patriarchs. It began as a historical matter during the time of Moses and continued through the early great leaders of Israel such as Joshua and Samuel. It reached a height of glory during the reigns of Israel’s first three kings. The reigns of David and Solomon in particular “typify the ideal of

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God’s earthly kingdom during the Mosaic dispensation.”^47 Its Old Testament close was recorded in the book of Ezekiel, when the Shekinah glory left the temple in Jerusalem as the covenant people of God were carried off into ignoble exile as judgment for their apostasy (Ezek. ch. 8-11).

Yet, at the same time, God graciously revealed to his faithful remnant that the glory would one day return and that, one day, the kingdom would once again be established on earth, in the city of Jerusalem. On that day, God would “dwell in the midst of the children of Israel forever” (Ezek. 43:7).^48 Through the prophetic books of the Old Testament, a small stream of prophecies about the coming eschatological kingdom of God soon became a raging torrent.

In the Old Testament revelation about the coming kingdom, there was a “deep note of mystery in the career of the coming King.”^49 The Old Testament reveals a striking dichotomy in the person of the King. He is presented as coming in glory to reign on the earth. Yet he is also presented as a man of sorrow, despised and rejected of men; wounded, bruised, afflictéd and dying for the iniquities of men (Isa. 53). He is the great shepherd of Israel, yet he is smitten by the sword of God, and the sheep are scattered (Zech. 13:7; cf. Isa. 40:9-11). He is Messiah the Prince of Israel, ruler of the nations, yet he is “cut off” and has nothing which belongs to his regal glory (Dan. 9:25, 26).^50

It is also important to understand that the Old Testament prophets revealed that the coming kingdom would be primarily spiritual in nature. As McClain said:

> It will bring personal salvation from the hand of God (Isa. 12:1-6), divine forgiveness for sin (Jer. 31:34), provision of God= s own righteousness for men (Jer. 23:3-6), moral and spiritual cleansing, a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek. 36:24-28), inward harmony with the laws of the kingdom (Jer. 31:33), recognition by men of all nations that Jehovah is the true God, the God who is able to answer prayer (Zech. 8:20-23), the restoration of genuine joy and gladness to human life (Isa. 35:10), and the pouring out of God= s Spirit “upon all flesh” (Joel 2:28).^51

In sum, the mediatorial kingdom of the Messiah, as prophesied in the Old Testament, is “material and spiritual, sacred and secular at the same time.”^52 As McClain put it, the kingdom:

> is spiritual; with effects which are ethical, social, economic, political, ecclesiastical, and physical. To single out any one of these important aspects, and deny validity to the others, is to narrow unwisely the breadth of the prophetic vision and to set limits upon the possibilities of human life on earth under God.^53

*What was the nature of the kingdom of heaven as John the Baptist saw it?*

As noted in chapter two, there is a strong split of opinion among conservative theologians on even the nature of the kingdom. Reformed theologians believe the kingdom to be primarily spiritual. Dispensationalists of all stripes believe it has a strong material or territorial element. Commentators on Matthew likewise have espoused a wide variety of views on the nature of the kingdom proclaimed by John. For example:

- Walvoord believes that the kingdom refers to the “climax of world history” which would be “an everlasting kingdom.” It would include “all who profess to be subjects of the King.”^54

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^48 McClain, "The Greatness of the Kingdom - Part I."

^49 Ibid.

^50 Ibid.

^51 Ibid.


^53 McClain, "The Greatness of the Kingdom - Part I." See also Herman A. Hoyt, "Dispensational Premillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, p. 82-84.

• France believes that the kingdom is “the establishment of God’s rightful sovereignty in judgment and in salvation.” It is the Messianic age.55

• Carson likewise stated that the kingdom was “the manifest exercise of God’s sovereignty, his ‘reign’ on earth and among men.”56

Who is right? Walvoord’s statements seem incomplete. As we have seen, the eschatological kingdom was prophesied to be holistic in nature, and that is how John would have understood it. He expected a physical reign, but with an acutely spiritual focus. This is evident from his message of repentance (3:2), his urging of the people to confess their sins (3:6), his scathing words to the Pharisees that “every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (3:10; NIV). It is also evident from John’s prophecy concerning the work of the coming King—he would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (3:11).

Like the other Old Testament prophets before him, John did not differentiate between the imminent coming of Christ for salvation purposes and the future coming of Christ in the consummation of his kingdom. This is to be expected, of course, since he did not have the framework to conceptualize one Messiah with two comings separated by a vast gulf in time.57 As Ladd put it, John “looked for a single, though complex, event of salvation-judgment.”58

What did John mean when he said that the kingdom of heaven was “at hand?”

There is a longstanding debate over the meaning of the phrase “at hand” (eggiken). There is certainly a variety of views on the subject.

• On the one hand, Walvoord believes John taught that, in the person of the coming Messiah, “the kingdom was being presented to Israel and to the world.”59 He states: “The kingdom being at hand meant that it was being offered in the person of the prophesied King, but it did not mean that it would be immediately fulfilled.”60

• At the other end of the scale, C.H. Dodd argued that the phrase “at hand” in 3:2 equalled the phrase “has come” in 12:28.61

• Offering a somewhat mediating view is France, who observed that the NASB phrase “is at hand” does not do justice to the perfect tense of engizo which literally means “has come near.” In his view, the phrase “introduces a state of affairs which is already beginning and which demands immediate attention.” In his view, even the Anchor Bible’s “fast approaching” is too remote. The time for decision “has already come.”62

• Carson as well adopts this view, asserting that “with Jesus the kingdom has drawn so near that it has actually dawned.”63

• Interestingly, Glasscock (a dispensationalist) appears to agree, stating that “the major point in the proclamation was that the kingdom promised by God through Messiah was at hand because the Messiah was in the world.”64

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56 Carson, p. 100.
59 Walvoord, Matthew - Thy Kingdom Come, p. 30.
60 Ibid, p. 38.
61 Carson, p. 117.
63 Carson, p. 117.
64 Glasscock, p. 70.
Certainly, the bare notion of an “offer” of the kingdom does not go far enough. John viewed the kingdom as “future, but close at hand.” It was “approaching in time” and “approaching in space,” but it had not yet arrived. The sense appears to be one of an inevitable and imminent approach that could not be halted, similar to that of a freight train bearing down on a car stalled on the railroad tracks. The same word is used in Matthew 26:46-47, where Jesus told his sleeping disciples, “Arise, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!” Verse 47 says, “while He was still speaking,” Judas came up to betray him. As Darrell Bock well summarized:

The point seems to be that with the coming of Jesus and the preaching of the message he commissions, the kingdom has arrived. Even if one prefers the sense of “approach,” the kingdom is at least very near.

Accordingly, John undoubtedly believed the advent of the earthly kingdom was imminent. The Messiah would usher in salvation and judgment. John’s pronouncement intentionally caused quite a stir among the Jewish people of Palestine. He set the stage for the beginning of Jesus’s public ministry.

The Coming Kingdom Proclaimed By Jesus

When John was put in prison, Jesus began his public Galilean ministry. Matthew 4:17 records that “Jesus began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” It is evident that Jesus explicitly adopted John’s message as his own. Matthew 4:23 also states that Jesus “went throughout Galilee . . . preaching the good news of the kingdom.” His teachings were accompanied by “healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people” (Mt. 4:23; also Mt. 9:35). As with Matthew 3:2, several questions arise with respect to these verses.

*Did Jesus mean the same thing John meant when he referred to the kingdom?* While most scholars agree that John the Baptist had the Old Testament concept of kingdom in mind when he spoke of the kingdom, the question of whether Jesus meant the same thing has been hotly debated. Saucy states:

Most interpreters have understood him to mean by the kingdom of God . . . something akin to the realm of spiritual salvation presently enjoyed in the church. In contrast to John’s understanding of ‘the apocalyptic hope of the visitation of God to inaugurate the Kingdom of God in the age to come,’ Jesus’ meaning is said to be ‘no apocalyptic Kingdom but a present salvation.’ The ‘nationalistic elements in the Jewish concept of the kingdom’ are purged away ‘to lay stress on the spiritual elements.’

Saucy rightly takes issue with this interpretation: “It is inconceivable that Jesus, knowing the understanding of his hearers, would not have immediately sought to correct their thinking if he in fact had another concept of the kingdom in mind.” Accordingly, it simply cannot be said that Jesus “purged” the nationalistic elements of the kingdom from his message. He never ignored the final consummation of the kingdom or even the uniquely Jewish flavor of the millennial reign (see Mt. 24-25).

The key to interpreting Jesus’s view of the kingdom is to understand that Matthew 4:17 and 4:23 are summary statements of Jesus’s message. When that message is considered as a whole, it is apparent that Jesus’s teachings on the kingdom had a two-fold emphasis: (1) the standard of conduct for the kingdom now and (2) the final consummation of the kingdom later. As discussed later in this paper, Jesus made it clear that the kingdom would not be consummated during His first advent. His focus on the spiritual dimensions of the kingdom, the righteousness of kingdom citizens, was not to the exclusion of the millennial period, but in conjunction with and preparation for it. As

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66 Ibid, s.v. "eggizo."
Saucy states: “The full Old Testament kingdom that had been proclaimed prior to that time was not going to be established now; the kingdom would, however, be present in the world in spiritual power during the interim.”

What did Jesus mean when he said the kingdom was at hand?

John believed that a unified kingdom (salvation and reign) was imminent. As explained above, Jesus did not modify John’s basic message. He did, however, in the course of progressive biblical revelation, break it out into its temporal components and emphasize each element separately.

Phase I: At times, Jesus spoke of the kingdom as being present in the person of the king. This aspect was more than “at hand;” it had already arrived. (Mt. 12:28).

Phase II: At other times, Jesus spoke of the kingdom as being present in a “mystery” phase, which appears to refer to more than himself and less than the final consummation. It is valid to speak of this aspect of the kingdom as “at hand” in the sense of being inevitably inaugurated. (Mt. 13).

Phase III: At still other times, Jesus spoke of the kingdom in its fullness. (Mt. 24-25). This final culmination of the kingdom was “at hand” only in the sense that it could come at any moment, but no one—not even Jesus—knew the day or the hour (Mt. 24:36). Only the Father knew the time or epochs which he had fixed by his own authority (Acts 1:6-7).

By breaking out the different phases of the kingdom into their temporal components, Jesus did indeed diverge from the message of John the Baptist.

The Coming Kingdom Proclaimed By The Disciples

In Matthew chapter 10, Jesus called his twelve disciples together and commissioned them to go throughout Israel preaching the message that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Mt. 10:7). The content of their message was identical to the message of Jesus and John before him. Carson is undoubtedly right in assuming that “repent” is not mentioned but presupposed. The kingdom was to be authenticated by the same miracles performed by Jesus: healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing those who have leprosy, and driving out demons. (Mt. 10:8). This foreshadows Phase II of the progressive eschatological kingdom development—the mystery phase, in which the kingdom is played out through the work of kingdom citizens after the ascension of Jesus into heaven.

Chapter Four: The Inauguration of the Kingdom

The Kingdom Advances

In Matthew 11, the imprisoned John the Baptist has heard of Jesus’s teachings and miracles, and he sent several disciples to ask whether Jesus was the Messiah or whether he should expect another. (Mt. 11:1-3). John was likely baffled by Jesus’s teachings regarding the kingdom because he had envisioned the kingdom (as did the Old Testament prophets) as a unified event of salvation and judgment. He expected the Messiah to bring both political and spiritual redemption to the people of Israel. Jesus’s emphasis on the spiritual aspects of the kingdom, seemingly to the exclusion of the political element, did not fit his conception of what the Messiah would be like. He needed comfort and reassurance.

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71 Saucy, p. 86.
72 Carson, p. 245.
Jesus provided it. He told John’s disciples to go back and report to John the many Messianic signs performed by Jesus—“the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” (Mt. 11:4-5).

Then Jesus said something enigmatic. He told the listening crowd, “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” (Mt. 11:11). Jesus thus drew a sharp line between John and the kingdom citizen. Both France and Carson believe Jesus was saying in this statement that John stood outside the kingdom of heaven. Jesus was not suggesting that John was not a believer; rather, his point was that John was the last of the Old Testament saints and, as such, he stood on the threshold of the eschatological kingdom. This implies that the kingdom was yet future during John’s public ministry.

Then Jesus said something even more strange: “And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force.” (Mt. 11:12). The phrase “the kingdom of heaven suffers violence” (NASB) has been variously interpreted. The NIV states that the kingdom “has been forcefully advancing.” The verb *biazetai* holds the key to the correct view. Carson believes that it supports the NIV rendering of the passage because it is in the middle form. This implies that “the kingdom has come with holy power and magnificent energy that has been pushing back the frontiers of darkness.” Moreover, instead of violent men taking over in a negative sense, forceful men take hold of the kingdom in a positive sense. As Carson sums up this difficult passage, “from the days of the Baptist—i.e., from the beginning of John’s ministry—the kingdom has been forcefully advancing . . . . But it has not swept all opposition away, as John expected.”

Carson thus views this verse as teaching that during John’s time of ministry, the kingdom of God was inaugurated. France similarly interprets this verse as meaning that John’s fate was “the foretaste of the conflicts which are already beginning to affect the new order” and that “God’s kingdom is clearly seen as already present, as a force sufficiently dynamic to provoke violent reaction.” In other words, the kingdom had come in some preliminary way at the time Jesus began his public ministry, after John had been put in prison (Mt. 4:12), through Jesus’s powerful preaching and miracles.

**The Kingdom of God Has Come Upon You**

If there is any doubt remaining that the kingdom of God has arrived in an inaugural sense with the first advent of Christ, Jesus swept it aside by proclaiming in Matthew 12:28 that “the kingdom of God has come upon you.” Saucy has said in this regard:

> Though the emphasis of the teaching of Jesus was on the futurity of the kingdom, His total message concerning the kingdom also included its presence and the possibility of men and women entering the kingdom now. He said it was present in the power of the Holy Spirit when He cast out demons (Matt. 12:28), and therefore it can be understood as having been present in all His miraculous works.

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73 France, p. 194; Carson, p. 265.
74 Carson, p. 266.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid, p. 267
77 Ibid, p. 266.
78 France, p. 196.
Hence, Jesus’s driving out demons, by the power of the Holy Spirit, “prove[s] that the kingdom age has already dawned.”80 The words “has come upon” (ephthasen) suggests an arrival which catches unawares.81 Interestingly, Glasscock agrees: “the only logical conclusion was that the kingdom of God had come.”82

(*How had the kingdom of God come during Jesus’s earthly ministry?*)

Blaising and Bock summarize:

Whereas Jesus advances the tradition of the Old Testament prophets by predicting the coming of the eschatological kingdom with Himself as Messiah, there are some occasions in the Gospels when He speaks of the kingdom as being present in His own day. In these sayings, the kingdom is present in the sense that He Himself, the King of that kingdom, is present among them, displaying in Himself and in His activity the characteristics of the eschatological kingdom.83

They distinguish the kingdom as present in Jesus’s pre-cross ministry from the kingdom in its post-cross sense:

The difference . . . is not only a difference between His service of suffering and His future glory, but also the difference between the kingdom being in Jesus and the kingdom being *universally established*. The kingdom was revealed in and through Jesus’ activity. It was quite dynamic, being seen in displays of His power. However, He did not at that time *institute* the kingdom as an abiding structure for the world. It was only after the cross that He inaugurated certain aspects of the kingdom in an institutional sense.84

Revised dispensationalists disagree. Although Walvoord does not treat 12:28 in his commentary on Matthew, Pentecost interprets the verse to mean that “since Christ did cast out demons by God’s power, it must be concluded that His offer of the kingdom was genuine and He was its bona fide King.85 In my view, this does not do justice to the passage. The sense is that the kingdom has “just arrived.”86 God’s kingdom has come; it is present in His person.87

Revised dispensationalists consider chapter 12 to be a pivotal passage to their central tenet that Jewish rejection of Jesus resulted in a postponement of a kingdom offer. As Pentecost has asserted, “the nation had rejected Him and the kingdom had to be postponed.”88

Many critics have had trouble with the idea that the kingdom was placed in abeyance because of the rejection of the Jewish religious leaders. Their critique has, for the most part, focused on the divine side of the equation. For example, Ernest C. Reisinger declares:

My Bible knows nothing about a God who does not have power to perform His plan. The God of the Bible is sovereign in creation, sovereign in redemption, and sovereign in providence. He is all-wise in planning and all powerful in performing.89

81France, p. 209.
82Glasscock, p. 270.
83Blaising and Bock, p. 248.
84Ibid, p. 251.
Kenneth Barker likewise asserts:

I would not use such terminology. The omniscient, sovereign God never ‘postpones’ anything. Israel’s rejection of their Messiah at his first advent—and along with him, the full expression of the theocratic kingdom at that time—was foreseen by God and, in fact, was part of God’s plan to accomplish redemption through the “sufferings of Christ.”

Walvoord defends the postponement view against these attacks by stating that “what is postponed from a human standpoint is not postponed from the divine standpoint” because “with God, all contingencies and seeming changes of direction are known from eternity past, and there is no change of God’s central purpose.” Walvoord should be applauded for recognizing that God’s redemptive plan for humanity was centered around the cross and that His plan never changed. Still, the question remains: given this truth, why use postponement language at all? Indeed, from the “human standpoint,” was the kingdom really postponed?

It seems to me that, even from a human perspective, a postponement of the kingdom is hard to square with the biblical data. If the kingdom was postponed in chapter 12, why did Jesus say in Matthew 12:28 that the kingdom “has come”? In addition, why did he proceed in chapter 13 to discuss the nature of the kingdom in his parables?

Revised dispensationalists appear to be inconsistent in holding that the eschatological kingdom was postponed in chapter 12 but that another “mystery form” of the kingdom was presented in chapter 13. For example, Merrill Unger states that the kingdom of heaven is “now being consummated in this present age” as described in the “seven mysteries of the kingdom” in Matthew 13. John Walvoord says that “in Matthew 13, the kingdom in its present mystery form is revealed, that is the rule of God over the earth in the hearts of believers during the present age when the King is absent.” But where is the evidence that the form of the kingdom in Matthew 13 is a separate kingdom from the eschatological kingdom prophesied by John and announced as “at hand” by Jesus? Isn’t it better to simply view the “mystery” as the revealing of a heretofore hidden phase of the same eschatological kingdom declared as “upon you” in Matthew 12:28?

Moreover, Matthew 12:28 is not the only verse to support a presently inaugurated kingdom. Matthew 19:12 also refers to the inaugurated form of the kingdom. There, in teaching on marriage and divorce, Jesus made the following comment: “For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to accept this, let him accept it.” Jesus’s point was that some believers can remain single rather than get married “for the sake of the kingdom” or as Carson puts it, “because of its claims and interests.” This must be a reference to the present kingdom (Cf. Mt. 22:30).

Matthew 16:27-28 also appears to discuss the inaugurated form of the kingdom. There, Jesus told the disciples that “there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.” Although some commentators take this enigmatic passage to refer to the Transfiguration, it seems to me that Carson is right in observing that this would be “an extraordinary way to refer to Peter, James and John, who witness the Transfiguration a mere six days later.” The better fit is that this is “a more general reference . . . to the

90 Kenneth L. Barker, “The Scope and Center of Old and New Testament Theology and Hope” in Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church, p. 315 n.50.
91 Walvoord, Major Bible Prophecies, p. 207.
94 Carson, p. 419.
95 E.g., Walvoord, Matthew - Thy Kingdom Come, p. 126.
96 Carson, p. 380.
manifestation of Christ’s kingly reign exhibited after the Resurrection in a host of ways, not the least of them being the rapid multiplication of disciples and the mission to the Gentiles.”

**The Mystery of the Kingdom**

In chapter 13, immediately after the rejection of his Messiahship by the Galilean Pharisees, Jesus teaches in parables. Parables were designed to reveal the truth to believers and hide the truth from unbelievers (13:13-15). Jesus told his disciples, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted” (13:11). Walvoord states that the parables in Matthew 13 were designed “to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom.” He believes that these mysteries were hidden in the Old Testament and revealed in the New Testament. They “deal with the period between the first and second advent of Christ and not the millennial kingdom which will follow the second coming.” After the Jewish leaders’ rejection of Jesus as Messiah and the resulting postponement of the kingdom, Jesus introduced “a new method of teaching.”

Carson essentially agrees that the rising opposition to Jesus encouraged his greater and greater use of parables. However, he disagrees that there was a “sudden switch in method.” Jesus had taught in parables before (cf. Lk. 5:36; 6:39). Carson also disagrees that the kingdom undergoes a radical shift with the mention of mystery.” On the other hand, he agrees that Jesus introduced a “new truth” about the kingdom:

> The ‘mystery of the Kingdom is the coming of the Kingdom into history in advance of its apocalyptic manifestation.’ That God would bring in his kingdom was no secret. All Jews looked forward to it. The new truth, now given to men by revelation in the person and mission of Jesus, is that **the Kingdom which is to come finally in apocalyptic power, as foreseen by Daniel, has in fact entered the world in advance in a hidden form to work secretly within and among men**.

The mystery phase is thus not a separate kingdom from that which preceded it and that which will follow; it is a phase or form of the same eschatological kingdom. It is “the presence of ‘sons of the kingdom’ (that is, people who truly belong to the eschatological kingdom) in the world prior to the coming of the Son of Man.”

*What do the parables teach about the mystery phase of the kingdom?*

The parable of the soils (Mt. 13:3-9) teaches that the mystery phase will involve some who believe and many who will not believe. The parable of the weeds (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43) explains how the kingdom can be present in the world while not yet wiping out all opposition. Jesus’s explanation in verse 41 is interesting. He says that, “at the end of the age,” the Son of Man will “weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil” (NIV). This suggests that the kingdom exists before the Son of Man returns to establish his millennial kingdom. The parable of the mustard seed (Mt. 13:31-32) explains that, while the kingdom has a small beginning, it is organically connected to the kingdom in its future glory. This organic development militates against speaking of the inaugurated and consummated phases of the kingdom as separate kingdoms. The parable of the yeast (Mt. 13:33) has essentially the same meaning. The parables of the treasure and pearl speak of the supreme importance and value of the

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97 Ibid, p. 382.
100 Carson, p. 304.
103 Blaising and Bock, p. 254.
105 Carson, p. 317.
kingdom. The parable of the householder shows that Jesus’s teachings are new and revolutionary (Mt. 13:52). The old treasure is the already revealed prophecies about the kingdom. The new treasures are the new knowledge imparted by Jesus with regard to the mystery phase of the kingdom. The new complements the old to create one “treasure,” the kingdom of heaven.

Chapter Five:
Kingdom Living

The Sermon on the Mount

By now, it should not be surprising that there are many views on the proper interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount. If the kingdom is solely future in orientation, then the logical conclusion is that the Sermon is not intended for believers of any age other than the millennial period. Quite understandably, most dispensationalists recoil from such a view, holding instead that the “full, non-fudging, unadjusted fulfillment” is for the millennial age, but that the Sermon is “applicable and profitable” to believers in the church age. How this can be true without adopting a non-literal hermeneutic of the Sermon is unclear.

The better view, it seems to me, is that the Sermon on the Mount describes the righteous character of a kingdom citizen—one who is living in the kingdom as it exists in its mystery phase here and now (cf. Mt. 5:20). France called the Sermon a “manifesto setting out the nature of life in the kingdom of heaven.” Lloyd-Jones calls it “a perfect picture of the life of the kingdom of God.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus went to great pains to emphasize the spiritual elements of the kingdom. As Carson has observed, the “unifying theme of the sermon is the kingdom of heaven.” For example, the theme of the kingdom envelopes the Beatitudes. The first Beatitude is “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:3), while the last is “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:10). This suggests to Carson that the intervening Beatitudes are kingdom blessings as well.

The theme of kingdom is similarly prominent in terms of a kingdom citizen’s perspective (“seek first His kingdom and His righteousness”) (Mt. 6:33). Carson puts it well: “To seek first the kingdom . . . is to desire above all to enter into, submit to, and participate in spreading the news of the saving reign of God, the messianic kingdom al-
ready inaugurated by Jesus, and to live so as to store up treasures in heaven in the prospect of the kingdom’s con-
summation.\footnote{Ibid, p. 181-82.}

Finally, at the close of the Sermon on the Mount, the theme of kingdom is closely aligned with salvation (Mt.
7:13-14). Jesus alone decrees who will enter into the kingdom (Mt. 7:21-23). Hence, Carson notes that the Sermon
on the Mount equates entering the kingdom with entering life.\footnote{Carson, p. 101.}

Jesus’s Later Teaching on Kingdom Living

At the close of his earthly ministry, Jesus came back to the topic of kingdom living. In Matthew 18:1-4, Jesus in-
structed his chosen disciples on humility: “[U]nless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter
the kingdom of heaven.” (See also Mt. 19:14). He taught that a kingdom citizen must continuously and repeatedly
forgive others (Mt. 18:21-35).

Matthew 19:23-26 also points out the spiritual predominance of Jesus’s kingdom teachings. Jesus told his disci-
ples that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”
The disciples understood by this time that the kingdom involved more than a mere political reign. As Glasscock ob-
served: “Their question, ‘Who then can be saved?’ revealed the connection in their mind between entering the king-
dom of heaven (v. 23) with being saved (v. 25).”\footnote{Glasscock, p. 393.}

Chapter Six:
The Consummation of the Kingdom

Although Jesus’s teachings during the first part of his ministry, as recorded in Matthew, focused on the presently
inaugurated aspects of the kingdom, Jesus certainly did not neglect the topic of fulfillment of the kingdom. For ex-
ample, in Matthew 8:11-12, Jesus foreshadowed the fact that, in the millennial kingdom, Gentiles would be included
while the Jews who rejected their Messiah would be left out. This same teaching was repeated in Matthew 21:42-43.

As Jesus’s death grew closer, his teachings on the end of the age grew more prominent. Hence, Matthew 24
through 25 contain the Olivet Discourse, a discourse about the coming culmination of the kingdom given by Jesus
during His last week before the crucifixion. In Matthew 24:3, the disciples asked Jesus, “what will be the sign of
your coming and of the end of the age?” Glasscock states that “the end of the age” is a clear reference to “the closure
of Israel’s rebellion and the beginning of the glorious kingdom.”\footnote{Glasscock, p. 464.}

Jesus responded by describing in significant detail the end of the age: the Tribulation period (Mt. 24:4-25), the
Second Coming of Christ (Mt. 24:26-31), and the regathering of true Israel at the beginning of the millennium (Mt.
24:36-41).\footnote{Glasscock, p. 490.} Jesus then offered several parables to demonstrate the certainty of his coming. (Mt. 24:42–25:30). Mat-
thew 25:31-46 describes the judgment on the Gentile nations that closes the end of the age and ushers in the millen-
nial period. Matthew 25:34 states that Jesus will invite Gentiles into the kingdom which had been “prepared for you
from the foundation of the world.” Glasscock rightly notes:

The kingdom Messiah is establishing will include the Gentiles, and not as a last-minute adjustment
to God’s plan but determined from the very foundation of the world (\textit{katholes kosmou}). The messi-
anic kingdom, therefore, was predetermined, before the world was put into operation, to be a place
for the human race to experience the divine kingship of God’s Anointed.\footnote{See generally Pentecost, \textit{Things to Come}, p. 275-280.}
In Matthew 26, Jesus and the disciples were eating the Passover meal and Jesus instructed the disciples on the ordinance of the Lord’s Supper. At this time, he told them, “But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father’s kingdom.” (Mt. 26:29). In other words, Jesus will not participate again in the Lord’s Supper until “the consummation” when he “will sit down with them at the messianic banquet.”

Chapter Seven: Some Closing Thoughts on the Kingdom

What does all this mean? It seems to me that the following points can be concluded from the teachings on the kingdom in Matthew’s gospel:

1. The kingdom of God in Matthew is unified and holistic. All at the same time, it is spiritual, material, ethical, social, political, physical and ecclesiastical.

2. At the same time, the kingdom has temporal components.

3. The kingdom’s nearness was tied to the first phase of Jesus’s earthly ministry. In proclaiming that the kingdom was “near,” Jesus suggested “not that the kingdom has arrived in fullness but that signs of its initial stages have come.”

4. The kingdom began to arrive with Jesus’s ministry (Phase I). It was present in the person of the King and the dynamic power that He exercised over demons, disease and death.

5. The kingdom advanced, and continues to advance, in its mystery phase (Phase II) during the inter-advent age. It is played out through the work of kingdom citizens during this present age. The Sermon on the Mount and other standards of kingdom living articulated by Jesus apply completely and directly to kingdom citizens in this inter-advent age.

6. The consummation of the kingdom of God on earth in the form of a thousand year millennial reign (Phase III) is the ultimate goal in biblical history. This event ushers in the final eternal state.

Several additional observations are also required.

First, this “already - not yet” framework, described above, is a dispensational framework. It does not lead to amillennialism or historic premillennialism. Indeed, dispensationalism has always been an evolving system, continually correcting weaknesses exposed through the criticism of others. This is one of its strengths.

Second, many revised dispensationalists implicitly adopt an “already - not yet” approach but refuse to use the terminology, presumably, out of fear of being associated with George Ladd. But as Bock stated in Israel, Dispensationalism and the Church: “One should not fear ‘already and not yet’ terminology since all Bible students accept its presence in soteriology: ‘I am saved (i.e., justified) already—but I am not yet saved (i.e., glorified) is good theology.”

Third, Matthew does not directly address the issue of whether Phase II of the eschatological kingdom is a Davidic phase or something less. Revised dispensationalists affirm that the “mystery form” of the kingdom is spiritual in nature. However, they are not willing to say that it is the same as the eschatological kingdom to come. In contrast, progressive dispensationalists hold that Jesus is already inaugurated as the Davidic king and is now reigning on the
This is probably the principal distinguishing point between the two forms of dispensationalism. However, resolution of this issue can only come from an exegetical study of Acts.

Fourth, there appears to be a clear link between the coming of Phase II of the kingdom and the eschatological coming of the Holy Spirit. This needs to be studied in more detail.

The debates over the nature of the kingdom of God will continue. However, a careful, exegetical study of the use of the kingdom in Matthew provides at least a framework for continued study. The kingdom came in the presence of Jesus Christ as King. It advances through the lives of kingdom citizens in the present age. It will come fully and completely with the second advent of Jesus Christ. Come, Lord Jesus.

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Matthew 18 New International Version (NIV). The Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. 18 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

2 He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. 3 And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. Causing to Stumble.

6 “If anyone causes one of these little ones whom I have made holy through my Name to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone tied around their neck and be thrown into the sea.”

In Matthew 6:33 (ESV) it says: “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. But what if we read the verse in context? This allows us to better understand Christ’s intended meaning. In this case, that requires studying Matthew 6:25-34. The Almighty calls us to seek first the kingdom of God instead of worrying about what we’ll eat, how we’ll dress — temporal or superficial concerns. Our Father, who is love and far more trustworthy than man, encourages us through Matthew 6:33 and other Bible verses to keep an eternal perspective even as we cross each day off of our calendars. You and I are called to refuse worry and anxiety. Instead, we seek first the kingdom of God. The Kingdom of Heaven is a dispensational term only found in Matthew’s gospel. It is a very important subject to grasp in order to understand Matthew, and the whole scope of God’s counsels. I recommend getting a solid grasp of this subject (see entry for the Kingdom of Heaven) before proceeding. It is in this great transitional chapter that we have the Kingdom in Mystery unfolded. Why seven parables? Seven is the number of spiritual completeness.