

FROM

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Thy Kingdom Come

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It is not surprising that a Christian's particular view of end-times and the return of our Lord Jesus Christ would have a dramatic effect upon how one understands the role of the individual Christians involvement in the world around them. Those who holds to a more pessimistic view of the future, and who see the world as merely the stage for the outbreak of God-hating evil predicted in Holy scripture, will tend to view the world around them as an evil place, awaiting judgment and destruction. The world and the unbelievers who inhabit it will ultimately be destroyed, because it, and they are evil. On the other hand, those who view the world more optimistically tend to see the world as the theater of God's redemptive activity, which accordingly extends to all spheres of life, including the political and social arenas. Involvement in Christianizing the world before Christ returns is seen as the primary mission of the church and involvement in reforming activity is seen as the hallmark of true piety. Both of these tendencies are popular in American evangelicalism today.

Don't Polish The Brass On A Sinking Ship

Those influenced by dispensationalism, and holding to doctrines such as a pre-tribulational rapture, anticipate the removal of believers from the earth before the great seven-year tribulation period. On this scheme, the primary focus of the church's involvement in the world shifts to evangelism, since the world will soon be subject to tremendous evil due to the rise of Antichrist and the bowl and trumpet judgements of the Apocalypse. The church's mission is that of Noah, to rescue as many lost souls as possible from the coming catastrophe. Implicit within this system are depreciated roles assigned for ecological stewardship, reform of injustices in society, political involvement, as well as a marked diminishing of the doctrine of calling, or vocation, which is each individual's divinely assigned role in fulfilling his or her God-given mandate to contribute to the building of a noble (though not redemptive) culture through common, everyday "secular" activities.

Instead, high value is assigned to full-time Christian service, and other tasks specifically oriented toward evangelism, and the creation of a Christian sub-culture designed to insulate Christians from the increasing worldliness and evil associated with the impending end. After all, the kingdom of God will not come in any form until Christ reigns physically upon the earth during the millennium. The kingdom of God is strictly future, something we await with the coming of our Lord.

The Ship Isn't Sinking After All

A more recent evangelical fascination, is the renewed interest in the optimistic eschatology of postmillennialism, the view of choice for evangelicals in the last century.

Ironically, many of those who eschew the postmillennial label for the more accepted premillennialism of American fundamentalism are nevertheless functionally postmillennial in their view of Christian involvement in the world. Here a Christian's role in the world is seen as the distinctly churchly and Christian activity. The goal is the complete Christianization of civil government, culture and society in general, and the means is any and all available to the Christian, whether political, cultural, or economic.

Various evils in society, such as pornography, abortion on demand, and the like, must be rooted out at every possible turn. The Church should use every possible means to accomplish these ends, extending all the way from the pacifist approach of simple prayer vigils to the more militant approach of physically obstructing entrances to abortion clinics. The kingdom of God is advanced through the church's kingdom activity here on this earth. The primary focus of such an eschatological viewpoint is upon the moral improvement of the world in anticipation of Christ's return. Since his coming is imminent, those holding to this optimistic view will ask themselves, To what kind of a world, and a moral mess will our Lord return? Have we really done all that we can do? How do we build the kingdom of God on this earth? Can our own efforts usher in our Lord's return?

Clearly, there is a great deal that rings true about both of these views. But if you are like me, there is also something definitely amiss about them as well. How can I deny the present reality of the kingdom of God, as the dispensationalists so easily do, when the scriptures clearly teach the present reality of that kingdom? (Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:15; with Luke 11:20 and Matthew 12:28.) On the other hand, I find myself asking, "Just exactly whose kingdom is this that we are talking about? And what is my role as an individual believer, and how does the church's corporate role as the body of Christ relate to this kingdom?" For the Scriptures also declare that this kingdom is not political. In fact, we are told that this kingdom is not even of this world (John 18:36). It is a kingdom that is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). How am I to deal with the fact that both Paul (II Thessalonians 2) and John (Revelation 20) anticipate a great rebellion and cataclysmic upheaval of evil and apostasy immediately before the return of Christ to judge the world?

Well, if you have these or similar questions, take heart, for Christians have thought long and hard about these questions of how believers are to be involved in the world, and the answer is to be found, in part I think, by returning to the historic and biblical eschatology which has been maintained by Protestants and Catholics at least since the fifth century.

The Ship Is Sinking, But Polish The Brass Anyway

One helpful aspect of this historic eschatology (sometimes known as amillennialism, or present millennialism) is the distinction made between the doctrines of redemption and creation. Simply stated this means that the world was created by God as good. It was the Fall of Adam which subjected the world to futility (Romans 8:20), and in fact, one of the great promises that Paul sets out in Romans 8 is that the world itself will someday be redeemed at Christ's return to earth (8:21). Therefore, it must be pointed out that the world has evil in it due to the fact that sinful men and women walk about upon it, and not because the material world itself is evil. The language in Scripture concerning the

coming destruction of the world is always connected to express declarations that the world will be re-created in a new heaven and earth (II Peter 3:10-13).

Therefore, Christians should see those aspects of the doctrine of creation, such as universal human dignity (because God has created all men and women in his image), involvement in civil affairs, the institution of marriage and the sanctity of the family, the need for ecological stewardship of the earth's natural resources and beauty, the importance of calling and vocation, and the creation of culture as good in and of themselves because they are a part of creation. A Christian's concerted involvement in all of these vital activities is good and necessary. Thus, should not hate the world but rather should strive to participate in creation to the fullest. We must remember that a primary aspect of eschatological expectation is that God himself will redeem and restore the world, an expectation which is to give the Christian hope that one day all will be right. There is biblical optimism, therefore, regarding a Christian's participation in that which belongs to the doctrine of creation.

However, there is another aspect of biblical data and historic eschatology that is also extremely important to keep in view. Christians know that a historical Fall did take place in a historical individual named Adam who represented all of humanity. And thus, a Christian must see the world as fallen in Adam. There is truly a biblical realism about the world associated with the reality and gravity of sin. Weeds grow in gardens where they once did not. Sweat forms on the brow where it once did not. Women travail in giving birth, when they once did not. There will be wars and rumors of wars. Loved ones will perish without Christ. Christians must realize that there is great evil residing deep in every human heart, and that because of this fact, the creation itself is said to be subjected to frustration. Things do not work as they should. There is death, sin, and material decay everywhere. Therefore, there is the constant need to work to restrain the evil in the human heart, to work to restore what is in a continual state of decay, and to constantly work to undo the great injustice that exists in society because of fallen human nature. Thus, Christians are not only to engage in such churchly tasks as evangelism, but they are also to function as salt and light in the restraint of evil by fulfilling their roles assigned them through the doctrine of creation.

And yet Christians need not ultimately be pessimists, even if they are pessimistic about human nature, for paradoxically, they know that this battle, however hard and justly they fight against evil, cannot be won, and will not be won until Jesus Christ himself returns to earth to raise his own from the dead, and to restore all things. But there is no doubt that Jesus Christ is coming again and he will restore all things when he does return. The final outcome of human history is therefore, quite secure, and there is no need to be an eschatological pessimist, even if one is realistic about sin and the human condition. His kingdom will come and his will shall be done!

But the scriptures also exhort Christians to be in the world, and yet not of it. There is the sense in which we must see ourselves as pilgrims, awaiting the summing up of all things in Jesus Christ. Our ultimate home is to be the new heavens and the new earth and not in the earthly existence that we now know. One reason for this focus is that the creation

itself is not to be worshipped, for it testifies to the God who made it. And even in its fallen condition the world bears compelling testimony to the fact that a day is coming when God will come in Jesus Christ to restore all things. Thus we must operate under the correct biblical assumptions that our involvement as Christians in this world really matters, and therefore, in a sense we are to be optimistic about our duties as Christians.

But we must also be realistic, for all of our efforts cannot ultimately usher in the consummation of the kingdom of God and a new and redeemed earth. The Scriptures assign this role to the Creator-Redeemer at his return. Therefore, we must be careful not to offer our ultimate commitment to this world and the vanquishing of the evil condition of fallen humanity. The great cultural accomplishments, from the Taj Mahal to the pyramids, and the great worldly empires, from the Egyptian Pharaohs to Washington, D.C., will be reduced to ashes in one moment.

Nevertheless, God has decreed that our involvement in this world and our prayers on its behalf really do make a difference in improving the course of events in the meantime, by restraining evil and promoting the good of our neighbor, and by serving as the means God uses to bring redemption in the midst of increasing evil. From our perspective, our involvement does change things. We can participate in the evangelism of the world. On a limited scale we can see injustice remedied, the homeless fed and clothed, and the rape of the earth undone while we await our Lord's return. Thus, there is a realistic appraisal of the world and the human condition, and a promise that our efforts do make a difference based upon the knowledge that our Lord will come back to set all things right.

Another vital aspect of this eschatology relates to our understanding of the nature of the kingdom of God. We must be clear that the kingdom for whose arrival we pray earnestly is not ours, nor brought by our efforts. It is God's rule, or reign, to which we refer when we speak of the kingdom of God. It is something that God extends, God brings, God controls. Yet God is pleased to use us, his people, in the process of the unrelenting advance of his kingdom which is fast approaching its second millennium.

Thus, this kingdom cannot be seen as a geopolitical or national entity (such as the nation-state of Israel), nor as a movement headquartered in sacred city or building, nor as a particular ministry or denomination. But let us not lose sight of the rest of the biblical data which declares that this kingdom is a real and powerful kingdom, ultimately conquering all of God's enemies in the appointed time (I Corinthians 15:23-28). Christians must balance this tension between the kingdom of God as all-conquering on the one hand, and evil as constantly increasing before the end on the other.

One way in which the historic eschatology of the Reformation has done this is with the helpful motif of the "already and the not yet." The Scriptures declare that the kingdom has come. We live in the light of its benefits. That is, we possess the "already" elements of it. It is advancing unceasingly even now. We participate in the advance of the kingdom of God through all of our spiritual activity. But this kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, and it does not occupy any specific geographical location, nor does it have an address. It does not issue political or social decrees, nor does it accept the repeated attempts of power-seekers to help it materialize in terms of visible social and political power in exchange

for its support.

The very nature of this kingdom and its constant advance is to provoke the ever-present evil in the world to violent wrath. Physical evil has not yet been fully destroyed, as it will be when our Lord returns to this earth to judge the living and the dead.

Thus, there is a sense in which we eagerly await the coming of our Lord to finally put an end to evil and human suffering, to create the new heavens and earth, and to raise up our mortal bodies for glorious ones as our Lord possessed in his resurrection. This is what is known as the "not yet" for which we eagerly wait. This is why our Lord expressly instructed us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." For that kingdom which has come and is coming, will one day yet in the future come in its fullness, when Christ returns and assumes his lordship over the whole earth which he has redeemed, personally exercising from his throne all dominion, authority and power, when every tear has been wiped away and there is no night. Only then will our work and involvement as Christians in service to our Master and his kingdom finally cease as we enter into the eternal Sabbath rest, of which we have had but a taste in this life. §

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