

Paul And The Gospel Of The Kingdom

Peter Reynolds

*Pastor, Manukau Central Bible Fellowship Church,
Board Member and Lecturer at Grace Theological College*

* * * * *

Interpreting and understanding Paul must begin with a question of *structure* before moving to themes in Paul such as justification by faith, or his teaching on the Spirit, etc. We should begin by asking about Paul's place in the history of redemption. Where does he fit in as an instrument of revelation? How significant is it that Paul came after the coming of the kingdom of God? Answers to these questions will give us a broad orientation before picking up on a particular theme.

Approaching the Pauline corpus is like coming into a tall building with many floors. We want to be sure that we come in by the front entrance and thus have access to all the floors. Without an understanding of the framework Paul was working with we risk coming in through a side door that might lead perhaps to the basement. There we remain, mistakenly thinking that this is all there is to Paul's theology and perspective.

I. The Relationship between the Teachings of Jesus and the Teachings of Paul with respect to the Kingdom of God.

The coming of the Kingdom of God was the integrating element, the category of all of Jesus' teaching. It was the matrix in which Jesus lived, acted, and taught. The kingdom of God was the final order in creation, finally announced and ushered in by Christ's own coming. It was the fulfillment of OT promise, inaugurated now and to be consummated at His return. Hence eschatology was the controlling viewpoint of Jesus' proclamation, both present and future, (eschatology as defined by Christ's first coming as well as by His second coming).

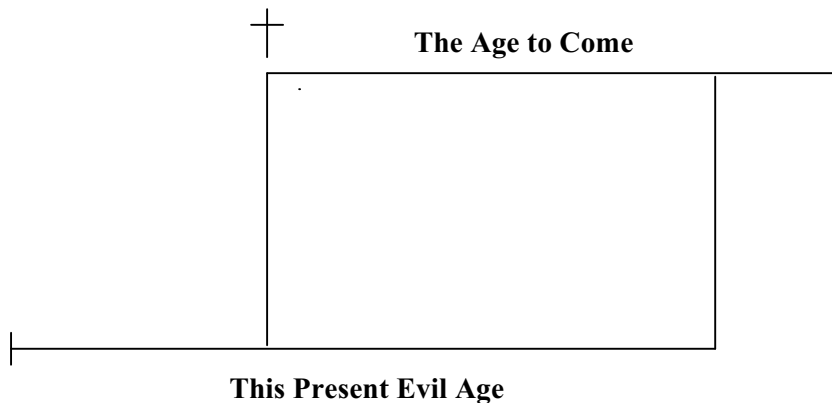
In Paul the "Kingdom of God" terminology recedes but the eschatological structure of the kingdom of God as the matrix, remains the integrating element (ref. Acts 20:25,27). In Paul's perspective on the kingdom of God we have the fuller answer to the disciples question in Acts 1:6. In Acts 20:20-21 Paul links his preaching of the kingdom (the whole counsel of God) with everything that is helpful, repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ (just as it was in Christ's own proclamation of the Gospel). So the kingdom of God was basic and all encompassing to Paul's ministry. The gospel of the grace of God is the gospel of the coming kingdom, with repentance and faith being the primary blessings of the kingdom - the way of entry into the kingdom and the means of continuing in the kingdom (Acts 28:30-31).

For Paul, as with Jesus, the kingdom of God has both a present sense (Col 1:13), and a future sense (Gal 5:21). So for Paul, as for Jesus, the Kingdom of God is both "already", but "not yet." Like Jesus, Paul can place all of his teaching under the category of the kingdom of God. Here is continuity with Jesus and with the Gospel writers. What is in view in the ministry of both is the eschatological Lordship of Christ for the renovation of creation and the redemption of His people. This is the scope of Paul's teachings. And all of this finds its focus in the Gospel summons. Paul, throughout his writings, does nothing but explain the eschatological reality which in Christ's teaching is called the kingdom of God.

II. The Two Age Reality

Paul's understanding of the kingdom as he develops it beyond the proclamation in the Gospels is the structure within which particular themes in Paul must be understood. For Paul, as for Jesus, the age of the kingdom of heaven has overlapped with this present evil age of earth. The reality of being at the same time part of two ages provides the structure from which Paul's theology and teachings arise.

Diagram showing the present two-age reality



This two-age construction is one that takes account of the total flow of history from creation to consummation, and is common to both Paul and Jesus (Matt 12:32: Eph 1:21). These two ages, ("this present age" and "the age to come"), are consecutive, comprehensive and antithetical. This age is sinful and ends in death. The age to come is the final world order of righteousness, perfection and life, in short the new heavens and the new earth. The division point between the two is the first coming of the Messiah to usher in the new age.

The Apostle Paul uses this two-age framework/structure, in which to explain his theology and practice for Christian living. Paul preaches a Gospel of deliverance from this present "evil age" (Gal 1:3f.), or "dominion of darkness" (Col 1:13), a comprehensive deliverance from all that belongs to this age (Eph 2:1-10). Before our conversion we used to follow the ways (aeon) of this wicked world (cosmos), (Eph 2:1-2). The resurrection has released us from this age and has bought us into the reality of the age to come (Eph 2:6-7). We have been delivered to a new world order in which we live and serve as new creations, in Christ (Eph 2:10).

This is how we are to understand, for instance, Rom 12:1-2. We are not to be conformed to the pattern of this "age" since we have been delivered from it. This transformation of the mind is a renewal of the age to come to which we are *presently* called and placed. What follows then (12:3ff) are new creation (new age) ethics.

Paul uses "age" and "world" interchangeably, "aeon" and "cosmos" (1 Cor 1:20) to mean the same thing, namely this present evil age whose wisdom and rulers are coming to nothing (1 Cor 2:6). Gospel wisdom is not of this age. The gospel wisdom and knowledge the believer has is eschatological, it is wisdom belonging to the age to come.

There is a radical difference then between belief and unbelief, foolishness and wisdom (2 Cor 6:14-16). It is a difference of two world orders. There is no common ground of rationality, no epistemological point of contact. The Gospel can only be embraced by those who are ready to be done with this age and all it stands for, including its apparent wisdom. Such a radical shift is only possible if God opens their hearts to see what they never saw before, the foolishness of this world's wisdom, the foolishness of this age, and the wisdom and glory of the age to come which is a present reality with us.

III. Conclusion

We have here a basic *structural* consideration in Paul. Historically and eschatologically there are two creation orders for Paul. There is the OLD, the things of this fallen creation, of this age, and there is the NEW, the new creation the new order ushered in at Christ's resurrection. For the individual Christian the old has passed away and the new has come, we are already participating in the new world order. "When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; the old order has gone, and a

new order has already begun" 2 Cor 5:17 NEB.

There is continuity here between Paul and Jesus. What is basic to both is the same to both in all its historical and eschatological dimensions, namely the reality now of the kingdom of God in this present evil age. Thus can be seen the pivotal significance of the death and resurrection of Christ. This is the crucial event in the history of redemption. The point at which history experienced the "turn of the ages."

Paul is concerned to place his ministry in the redemptive-historical context in which he himself lives. He is living in the fullness of time, the new creation has already come. The final eschatological order of events is here (1 Cor 10:11b, Heb 6:5). For Paul the turn of the ages in Christ's first coming sets the context of his ministry and establishes its focus, or subject matter. Everything that Paul taught is to be understood in the context of this two-age structure. This is the front door entrance of Paul's theology.

IV. Some Implications

1. Eschatology and Exegesis

The relevance of the New Testament to us today is based on what is historically common to both the writers and the readers. The historical distance between us and Paul is no threat or hindrance to our NT based faith. Paul is describing for himself the situation that is our situation.

We today are in the same redemptive-historical situation as Paul. We share the same eschatological tension between what has happened in Christ and what will yet happen. Yet unlike Paul we are not able to describe this situation with infallible, inspired insight. Paul has done that for us, his fellow believers in Christ. Paul's exegesis then is the norm for all subsequent exegesis. We build upon his apostolic foundation. We seek to draw out the implications of that foundation in our own exegesis. This is the hermeneutical significance for us who are living in the same fullness of time in which Paul lived, and who are preaching and teaching the same message that he held to.

2. Eschatology and the Holy Spirit

In Paul's theology the Holy Spirit's work is eschatological. Because of the Holy Spirit's work we participate now in the new age as He applies to us the benefits of the new age won for us by Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit works with the consummation in view. His is a public activity in that the age to come is a common present experience for all believers. His work of applying the benefits of the new age to us is intimate in the believers' life but it is not private. Hence we should be asking one another, "What is the Holy Spirit doing in all of our lives?" rather than the more common question, "What is the Holy Spirit doing in your life?"

His work is related to the overall eschatological programme in which every believer participates. His work in the church and in the individual believer is of one piece with His renovating of the whole world order. To understand what the Holy Spirit is doing we should have reference to the future rather than the present, since the future is our present. The Holy Spirit is the power of the future already now at work (Heb 6:5).

3. Eschatology and Sanctification

Such is the unity and solidarity believers have with the resurrection of Christ that Paul can say we have already been raised. Our resurrection has already happened. Our present, personal experience of reality should be of the resurrected life, with our bodily resurrection being still future. We have been bought from death to life while still in our mortal bodies (Rom 6: 12-13, 8:11). *We are alive with the life of the age to come while continuing to live out this life.* We are participants of a new creation order, within the old order which is passing away. So the whole person can be regarded from two aspects, an "already" and a "not yet" aspect.

Part of the reality of our resurrection is already being experienced in our sanctification. Hence for

Paul the imperative and the indicative lie side by side as non-polar, non-dialectic statements arising from the two-age perspective on Christian ethics. The indicative is primary and foundational, accomplished by Christ and received by faith, and provides the grounds, the impetus, for the imperative. Without the indicative Paul is no more than a legalist, or a moralist. Without the imperative Paul becomes an antinomian, or a pietistic mystic. Nor does the indicative exist by itself awaiting the imperative response. They are given together. The positive response to the imperative is the attestation of the indicative apart from which the indicative does not exist. Our need to grow in holiness is as real as our participation with the exalted Christ. We are people of two worlds, of two realities. Our sanctification is already but not yet.

4. Eschatology and Experience

The spiritual blessings we now experience are by virtue of our being in the heavenlies (Eph 1:3). Our existential reality is that we are in heaven with Christ already. This is because that is where Christ is (v.20), and so that is where we are (Eph 2:6). Yet we are also waiting for Christ's return. The two perspectives blend. Our present situation finds us in the overlap of history and eschatology, a cosmic dualism. We have to contend with two realities (Col 3:1-5), our minds are on the heavenly but the members of our bodies still participate with this present evil age. It is not a separated dualism. We contend with this age, *because* we have our minds set on heavenly things. This temporary dualism does not threaten our concrete existence in Christ but rather defines our relationship to this present evil age.

5. Eschatology and Suffering

We suffer *because* we are raised with Christ. We suffer on earth *because* we are seated with Christ in glory, in heaven where He is. The power of the exalted Christ is perfected in our weakness, our suffering (2 Cor 12:9-10). So the eschatological victory of Christ is ours (church) now, through suffering. The resurrected life without suffering is an illusion. The suffering of Christ and of believers are seen together. Their collective suffering equals one entity (Col 1:24). This is not to deny the uniqueness of Christ's suffering. Our sufferings do not reconcile us to God. Rather they serve to establish the solidarity of Christ with His people. Like Christ the fulfillment of God's purposes in us involves suffering, and these purposes must be fulfilled before the End comes.

Christian suffering is not limited to physical dangers. Christian suffering is all that pertains to being in the form of this present world that is passing away. We participate in a suffering creation, a world subject to frustration and decay (Rom 8:22). Suffering comes to us along with faith (Phil 1:29). They are both givens with each providing the context for the other. Hence suffering becomes necessary for our sanctification, providing the necessary opportunity for growth in Christ-likeness.

This has implications for our model of discipleship. If we think we can achieve spiritual maturity on our own we will always be defeated. If we think we can never become spiritually mature we will always be despairing. If we think we have achieved spiritual maturity we will be self-sufficient, and arrogant. Rather, we are all arriving at maturity because we are all in Christ, and He has arrived. This realisation we keep us hopeful and humble.

This in turn has implications for our understanding of shepherding, or pastoral care. Our concern should not only be for the outside of the cup but also for what is going on on the inside (1 Thess 5:14). We should be looking out for those who are defeated, despairing, and self-sufficient. Furthermore, struggle and suffering is all a necessary part of living in two ages. We do not need to rescue people from their struggle/suffering, but we do need to stand with them and help them to endure.

---oOo---