

# The Kingdom of God in Paul's Gospel

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## Introduction

The kingdom of God is a popular theme these days. The kingdom is a topic of books, articles, papers, conferences—even a whole issue of a journal may be devoted to it. Though not everything written about the kingdom is beneficial,<sup>1</sup> the general recognition of the kingdom and the renewed emphasis on the kingdom as an important biblical-theological theme and concept is welcome. For the most part, discussion of the kingdom centers on Jesus and the Gospels. It is not difficult to see why this is so. Jesus inaugurated his ministry with a proclamation about the kingdom: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). His ministry is all about the arrival of the kingdom and discourse about who will (or will not) enter the kingdom, and what the kingdom is like fills the pages of the Gospels. When we leave the Gospels and turn to Paul, however, what happens to the kingdom? We might get the impression that outside the Gospels the kingdom, except for a few mentions here and there, fades away into the background of the New Testament. People who put most of their emphasis on the Gospels may draw the conclusion that there is a marked distinction between Jesus’ concept of the kingdom and Paul’s theology. Similarly, people who spend most of their time preaching, teaching, and writing on Paul’s epistles may rarely speak of the kingdom, perhaps inferring that since it does not appear explicitly that often it must not be that important. A careful consideration of Paul’s letters,

however, should give us pause before we either assign the kingdom exclusively to the realm of the Gospels, or we relegate the kingdom to the outer reaches of Paul’s theology.

The aim of this article is not primarily to compare and contrast the kingdom of God in the Gospels with the kingdom of God in Paul, though it will be necessary and helpful occasionally to do so, but to explore the theme of the kingdom in Paul and the role it plays in his presentation of the gospel.<sup>2</sup> This article serves to set out the basic patterns of the kingdom as it appears in Paul with the hope that readers will be encouraged to pursue further study in this important but often neglected aspect of Paul’s theology. Ultimately, I hope that the kingdom will receive more emphasis in preaching and teaching on Paul’s epistles.

What follows is a brief consideration of some of the kingdom texts in Paul. Though much of what appears here is not “new,” the arrangement and ordering of the texts and themes differs from the way they are typically handled in works on Paul. The texts are divided up in three thematic sections. First, for Paul the kingdom of God is centered on the risen and ruling Christ and has a prevailing eschatological emphasis. Here the kingdom is inextricably linked to Paul’s soteriology. Second, Paul describes the citizens of the kingdom of God as those marked by character and conduct that identify them as the people who will inherit the consummated kingdom. At this point we see the in-breaking of the kingdom in the lives of

its subjects who are empowered to live in a manner worthy of the kingdom. In the third section, which I call “Paul and the ‘Mustard Seed’ Kingdom,” Paul himself is the subject showing himself as one who grasps and exemplifies the reality of the kingdom we read about in the Gospels. Paul’s life and ministry is an example of what the kingdom looks like in practice.

### **The Rule and Reign of the Risen and Redeeming Christ**

At the heart of Paul’s concept of the kingdom of God is the risen and enthroned Christ. Without suggesting yet another “center” of Paul’s theology, it is safe to say that the reality of the reigning Christ is a key component of Paul’s theology. In each case, these kingdom texts in Paul are connected to the central Pauline theme of redemption through the cross. Paul’s soteriology and his concept of the kingdom are inseparable.

#### ***Colossians 1***

In Col 1:13 Paul gives the basis for his thanks to God on behalf of the Colossians that begins in 1:3 and reaches a climax in his prayer in 1:9-12. Paul’s ultimate reason for giving thanks and for his confidence that God will in fact grant knowledge, fruitfulness, and perseverance, is that God has “rescued us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (1:13).

At the forefront is the idea that the Colossians have been moved from one kingdom to another—from the kingdom of darkness to that of the Son—or, as he says in v. 12 to “an inheritance of the saints in the Light.” For Paul, the kingdom is *now* in the hands of the Son by virtue of the resurrection. Through the cross and resurrection believers are made members

of a new kingdom. Note that here it is not the kingdom of God but that of “His beloved Son.” By asserting Jesus as King, Paul lays the foundation for verses 16-20 in which Christ has preeminence over all things in part by virtue of being the creator of all “thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities” (v. 16).

Christ’s kingly preeminence is not grounded in creation alone but in redemption, for it is through the “blood of his cross” that all things are reconciled to God (v. 20). This same connection is made in chapter 2 where Christ, in whom all the fullness of God dwells, is declared as the “head over all rule and authority.” In him believers are cleansed (circumcision of Christ v. 11), buried, and raised with him (v. 12), and God makes them alive with Him, having forgiven all transgressions (v. 13), all of which was accomplished at the cross where the “rulers and authorities” were defeated and put on “public display” (vv. 14-15). Thus in this text key elements of Paul’s Gospel—forgiveness, union, sanctification—are connected to the theme of Christ ruling and reigning. It should also be noted that Paul’s exhortations to the Colossians are informed by the understanding that Christ is above “seated at the right hand of God.” In other words, Paul’s ethics is established in the reigning Christ—but more of that later.

#### ***1 Corinthians 15:20-28***

In this text we find another convergence of the themes of kingdom and redemption. Likewise, we see the concept of the kingdom, again centered in the risen and ruling Christ, appearing with another key element in Paul’s theology, i.e., Adam/Christ Christology. The second Adam, Christ, is also the reigning King under whose feet all things are subjected.

His kingship is displayed ultimately in his defeat of the great Adamic enemy, namely, death (15:26). Like Colossians, there is a general theme of preeminence in this text, and again Christ's preeminence is linked to the resurrection. In Col 1:18 he is the "first born from the dead," here he is the "first fruits of those who are asleep" (15:20). As the first fruits of the resurrection, Christ is the guarantee of the resurrection for all believers. The phrase "first fruits," is not simply a guarantee—the first fruits stand for the whole harvest.<sup>3</sup> The resurrection of the King guarantees the resurrection of his people.

In this text Christ's resurrection and the final resurrection of all believers is conceived as one, unbroken eschatological chain of events that begins with resurrection and is consummated by delivering "up the kingdom to the God and Father, when he has abolished all rule and all authority and power." This seems to be in contrast to Colossians 1 where the kingdom belongs to the Son. The contrast, however, is a matter of eschatological emphasis and can be accounted for by the already/not yet aspect of the kingdom. Here Paul's focus is on the consummation of the kingdom that began with the resurrection of Christ and progresses on to the resurrection of those in union with him. Thus Paul speaks of things happening in their proper order—or each in its own rank (*tagma*). When the "end" comes, the reigning Son will, in dramatic fashion, subject even his rule to God who has subjected all things to the Son (v.28). All of this happens in fulfillment of Psalm 8 and a consideration of the context of that Psalm along with the other Psalm that shapes this text, namely Psalm 110, reveals a vital connection between Colossians and 1 Corinthians.

### *The Present and Future Rule of the Coming Messiah*

In Psalm 8 the son of man is elevated to the status of a King whose kingdom extends over all creation: "Yet you have made him a little lower than God, And you crown him with glory and majesty! You cause him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, All sheep and oxen, And also the beasts of the field, The birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea" (vv. 5-8). Significantly, the kingdom over which this son of man reigns is cast in language used to describe the universal dominion of God in other OT texts, particularly the Psalms. Psalm 47:7 declares that God is the King of all the earth; Psalm 93 envisions the Lord enthroned and ruling and reigning even over the raging seas; in Psalm 96, the heavens, the earth, the thundering sea and all it contains—along with all the nations—rejoice over the reigning Lord and his coming judgment; likewise, Psalm 97 says, "The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice" and then portrays the earth as trembling, and the mountains "melted like wax at the presence of the Lord"; and finally, Psalm 99: "The Lord reigns, let the peoples tremble, He is enthroned above the cherubim, let the earth shake" (v.1). Paul, in the language of Psalm 8, which itself contains OT imagery reserved for God's kingship, depicts Jesus as the sovereign ruler of God's creation, reigning over all things as they have been submitted to him by God. This is a present reality, yet it is no static kingdom but a kingdom that is moving ever onwards toward an eschatological consummation when the final enemy of God's kingdom is defeated. Paul's conception of the kingdom brings the present and the future together. This forges a direct link between Paul and

Jesus and their concept of the kingdom—a topic to pursue at another time.

It is also instructive to consider the broader context of the other Psalm employed by Paul in this text, namely Psalm 110.<sup>4</sup> In verse 25 Paul says, “He must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet.” This allusion to Psalm 110:1 links together Paul’s teaching on the present rule of Christ to the climactic episode that will come at the end. The Davidic Lord in Psalm 110 will, as both King and priest, finally defeat all other kings and nations (vv. 5-6). Yet in the meantime he will rule in the presence of his enemies at the right hand of God who is submitting and subduing all his enemies under his feet.” The messianic King has sovereign rule but the day is coming when that sovereign rule will be exerted fully and finally.

This matches Paul’s trajectory of the kingdom. Christ, as the second Adam brings life in the wake of the death that spread from Adam (v. 22); as the first fruits his resurrection guarantees and stands for the future resurrection of all those in union with him—he rises, *then* those who belong to him rise (v.23). Then, with the resurrection of those in union with Christ, when every “ruler, authority, and power” is destroyed, the end comes and the kingdom is handed over to God the Father—this is the consummation of the kingdom (v.24). Verses 25-26 give us the reason for why it happens in just this way—because it is necessary for him to rule until the ultimate, Adamic enemy, death, is destroyed. The allusion to Psalm 110 in v. 27 grounds Paul’s argument and chronology in Scripture and leads to the “when” of verse 28. The “when” in verse 28 is the “then” that Paul speaks of in 24: “when all things are subjected to him, *then*

the son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all.”<sup>5</sup> So Christ is ruling from resurrection to consummation—or as Garland puts it, “Christ’s reign does not wait until the parousia, but rather begins at his resurrection.”<sup>6</sup> His reign climaxes at the end when death, the enemy that arrived in the first Adam, is defeated and he delivers over the kingdom and subjects even himself to God—the unfolding of redemption comes to a close and we are left with “the unchallenged reign of God alone.”

As in Colossians there is a direct connection between Paul’s soteriology and his theology of the kingdom. The larger context of chapter 15 supports this idea. It is the life-giving, death-conquering second Adam whose resurrection guarantees both the forgiveness of sins (v. 17) and the future, immortal, imperishable life (vv. 53-54). Note that the enemies of the kingdom cannot be reduced to earthly kingdoms and empires—no, Paul’s perspective is not as eschatologically over-realized as that—the true enemies are sin and death. Whatever this text might say or imply about earthly empires and kingdoms, it is clear that Paul understands the ultimate enemy, the only enemy that really matters, to be spiritual in nature—death (which I take to be the condemnation that flows from Adam’s sin) must be defeated. That is the enemy that awaits final subjection under the feet of Jesus. It has been defeated in Christ’s resurrection, it will be finally defeated at the final resurrection where those in union with him will receive his final victory, the final subjecting of all things under the feet of the Lord of Psalm 110.

This is helpful, I believe, for understanding Paul’s difficult statement in

v. 24: “then *comes* the end, when He delivers up the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power.” What Paul has in view here, I suggest, is the consummation of the entire history of redemption. The reign of Christ the King is spoken of here specifically in its redemptive function. His cross and resurrection establish his position as the ruling and reigning Christ who sits on the throne ruling over the enemies of the kingdom. These enemies, though defeated, must still be fully subjected and destroyed. Once the enemies of the kingdom have been defeated once and for all, that specific redemptive role reaches its climax—there is nothing left to subject under his feet, it is the end of the “already and not yet.” When finally death is defeated, the “not yet” is realized. At that time the kingdom of God is established on earth as it is in heaven, and the Son, with all enemies having been destroyed, completes, as it were, his redemptive role and subjects even himself to the Father so that, as Paul says in verse 28, “God may be all in all.” As Schlatter puts it, “According to Pauline Christology, when Christ has fulfilled his commission, there can be no result other than the glorification of God, who is the author of all the authority and glory of Christ and all of life’s creation in union with him.”<sup>7</sup> While this interpretation may not tie up all loose ends, I think it does alleviate the tension interpreters have felt between this text and Rev 11:15 in which the seventh trumpet sounds and from heaven it is declared that “The kingdom of the world has become *the kingdom* of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.” The end-goal of salvation and the ultimate manifestation of the kingdom of God go hand-in-hand.

Now we’ll consider briefly a text not typically grouped with kingdom texts in Paul, but one that I think should be.

### *Ephesians 1*

Though Ephesians chapter 1 does not contain explicit lexical connections (that is, neither “kingdom” nor “kingdom of God” appear in them), it affirms that the kingdom in Paul’s Gospel is tied to Paul’s soteriology and focused on the rule of the risen King.

In Ephesians 1 Paul prays that his readers would, among other things, understand that the power that is at work in them is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead (vv. 19-20). Not only did the power of God raise Jesus from the dead, it also

seated him at His right hand in the heavens, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (1:20-23).

Paul’s words *pasēs archēs kai exousias kai dunameōs kai kuriotētos* (v. 21) parallel Colossians 1 and 2 where, as we saw earlier, Paul asserts that Christ is both the creator of all things, *eite thronoi eite kuriotētes eite archai eite exousiai* (1:16) and the one through whom God disarmed “the rulers and powers” (*tas archas kai tas exousias*) at the cross and “triumphed over them through him” (2:15). In Ephesians 1 the rule and reign of Christ is presented by Paul as the reality that exists as a result of God’s redemption in Christ. Again, as in both Colossians and 1 Corinthians, redemption and resurrection are the

precursors to the enthronement of Christ the King. The recitation of the gospel in Ephesians 1, in which Paul locates the believer's election, predestination, adoption, redemption and forgiveness in Christ (1:4-7) and the following prayer concerning the transforming reality of the gospel (1:15-19), are anchored in the fact that Christ has risen and is enthroned as King over all things. Christ the redeemer and Christ the King are inseparable. Soteriology and kingdom go together.

There are two other links to the kingdom in this passage. Paul affirms that when the Ephesians came to faith in Christ they were also "sealed in him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is a down payment of our inheritance" (1:13-14). In Paul's epistles inheritance language is central to many kingdom texts. For instance, in Ephesians 5:5 Paul will again use the term "inheritance" and further define it as "inheritance in the kingdom of God." The Spirit, as we shall see, is also present in a number of Paul's kingdom texts. Here the Spirit himself is the down payment of the future inheritance and is implicitly the power that is working in them, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead when the Father placed the risen Christ at his right hand (1:19-20). The Spirit, who is the down payment, also empowers believers toward their inheritance.

This provides a good transition to the next section. We'll now turn our attention to a second theme that characterizes the kingdom in Paul's Gospel, the kind of life that characterizes the inheritors of the kingdom.

### **Living in the "Already Present" Kingdom of God—or, the Present Marks of a Future Inheritance**

Perhaps the clearest overlap between

the kingdom of God in the Synoptic Gospels and the kingdom of God in Paul is the association of the kingdom with ethics—or better put, the kind of behavior that characterizes those who are in the kingdom over against that which characterizes those who are excluded from the kingdom. Like Jesus, Paul is not concerned with proclaiming a mere objective, or abstract kingdom, but a real kingdom with real citizens who live according to the standards of the kingdom. This citizenship is described in terms of having moved from death to life, or from darkness to light—not just from one opinion to another or one view to another. Again we see a link to soteriology. The redeemed are the citizens of the kingdom of God. For Paul, like Jesus, the behavior that should characterize the citizens of the kingdom is not something optional, or taught as good advice worth thinking about and perhaps trying out from time to time. Paul is quite clear about who will and will not inherit the kingdom of God. The "already/not yet" aspect of the kingdom of God is evident here as well. Paul speaks of the kingdom of God in both present and future terms. There are expectations for the behavior and life of believers in the present that are linked to the future consummation of the kingdom. The future inheritance should be evident in the present.

### ***Galatians 5***

In Galatians 5 Paul is clear about who will and will not inherit the kingdom of God.<sup>8</sup> The starting point for Paul's well-known list of the fruits of the Spirit is the summary of the whole Law from Lev 19:18—you shall love your neighbor as yourself (5:14). The fruit of the Spirit describes, in my view, the expectations

for the life of the justified. In other words, chapter 5 should be read while keeping the previous four chapters in mind. Paul's soteriology provides the backdrop for what he has to say about the lives of those who inherit the kingdom in chapter 5. Justification by faith, rather than leading to antinomianism, leads to freedom. It leads to a life that looks outward, beyond oneself, to God and to neighbor, and it is worth noting that one thing that characterizes all the fruit of the Spirit is the fact that it is all outward focused. The life of the justified is a life of true freedom—freedom to obey the love command, a central characteristic of life in the kingdom of God. And these are not mere personal or private traits, but things that are practiced in the community—it's easy, after all, to be patient with yourself. The fruit of the Spirit is what loving one's neighbor looks like in real life. It could justly be called "the fruit of the kingdom."

Set in stark contrast to the outward focused, other-centeredness of the fruit of the Spirit are the deeds of the flesh—behavior that is self-motivated and self-centered. This behavior, spanning the globe from immorality to idolatry, jealousy, dissention, and envy (to name but a few) have an ultimate consequence. As Paul puts it in verse 21, "those who do such will not inherit the kingdom of God." I think it is safe to infer that the fruit of the Spirit, which follows in verses 22 and 23, describes what must characterize those *who will inherit the kingdom of God*. While this may cause us some discomfort—the conclusion seems unavoidable. Citizenship in the kingdom of God must be marked by these fruits—otherwise, one will not inherit the kingdom.

This conclusion should not raise the red flag of works-righteousness, after all these

are the fruits of *the Spirit* not the fruits of *the self*. Besides, we have no problem whatsoever with what Paul states beforehand. No Christian is surprised at all by the fact that the immoral or the idolaters will not inherit the kingdom of God. In fact, evangelical Christians often take vocal stands against those who claim to be Christians but whose lives are marked by some of the very things Paul condemns. We simply do not believe that one can live a consistently immoral life and have hope of a future inheritance. Why, then, should we be hesitant to assert that those who inherit the kingdom ought to be characterized by love, patience, gentleness, and all the rest? These virtues are the present marks of citizenship in the kingdom, they are evidence of a future inheritance. The key is to remember that the inheritors of the kingdom are the redeemed, they are those who have been justified by faith. The fruit of the Spirit, necessary for final inheritance is the evidence of the work that has taken place in them—a work that included the gift of the Spirit. When Paul scolds the Galatians in chapter 3 he asks, "did you receive the Spirit by works of the Law or by hearing and faith?" (v. 2). He then adds, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (v. 3). "Works-righteousness" was ruled out in chapter 3 and Paul does not then turn around and make final inheritance of the kingdom based on works. The true inheritors of the kingdom—those who have received the Spirit—must not live as those who do not have the Spirit and will not inherit the kingdom. They must show the fruit of the Spirit they received.

### *Ephesians 5*

In Eph 5:7 Paul urges his readers to

“walk as children of the light” over against the “unfruitful deeds of darkness”—that is, I take it, their manner of life, described in 2:2, “when you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (2:1-2). This is supported by the fact that Paul here reminds them that they used to live in the darkness and he even uses a phrase taken right from 2:2, “the sons of disobedience.”<sup>9</sup> It is clear that Paul has a reasonable expectation that the Ephesians will be new people characterized by a new life. As in Galatians 5, the kingdom is mentioned here in negative terms in regard to who *will not* inherit it. He is not simply concerned to show the differences objectively, but to warn his readers away from the kind of living that is *unfitting* for those for whom Christ died (see v. 1). So he commands them not to allow “immorality or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and no foolish, silly talk, or course joking, which are not fitting but rather give thanks” (vv. 3-4). He then reminds them “that no immoral or impure or covetous person who is an idolater *has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God*” (v. 5). Again the inference seems clear: if it is not surprising that the immoral will not inherit the kingdom of God, then it should not be surprising if the converse is true – that there is a way of life that should characterize those who *do have an inheritance* in the kingdom of God. And this is exactly the inference we can draw from what Paul says. In contrast to those who walk in darkness and do not have an inheritance in the kingdom of God, the Ephesians are exhorted to “walk as chil-

dren of light” (v. 8). This walking in the light is accompanied by particular fruit, as he goes on to say, “for the fruit of the light is in all goodness and righteousness and truth” (v. 9). Given what we saw in Galatians 5 it should not surprise us that Paul will move from this section to teaching that is community, or “other,” focused. Two kingdoms are in view here—the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of God. Citizenship in both kingdoms is marked by ways of living that are set in contrast to life in the other kingdom.

It is also worth noticing here that Paul’s discussion of the kingdom of God, though different from the texts considered earlier, is nevertheless rooted in the cross and resurrection. The way of living Paul describes here, and throughout chapters 5 and 6, flows from 5:1. Paul calls them to “be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.” There is no disconnect in Paul between soteriology and life. No real division between doctrine and practice. Having established in chapter 1 that Christ is ruling and reigning over all things as a result of his cross and resurrection, and that believers have received the Holy Spirit as a down payment of their inheritance, Paul returns to the cross and resurrection as the basis for the new life lived out by those who are living under the exalted Christ and who will finally inherit the kingdom.

### **1 Corinthians 6**

The beginning of chapter 6 concerns one of various problems Paul addresses in the Corinthian church. This is about lawsuits; particularly lawsuits between believers. Paul draws their attention to



the damage that such an action (believers being tried by unbelievers) does to the church. Paul's solution for a better way to approach this matter and to avoid damage to the church from both inside and outside is radical and aimed at both parties: "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?" he says to one party (v. 7), and then turns to condemn the party that did the initial wrong and defrauding in verse 8. For believers to behave like this is unthinkable for Paul. And why? However else we might answer, we can at least say that such an action runs contrary to what should characterize those who will inherit the kingdom of God. Again we can infer this conclusion from a negative statement about who will not inherit the kingdom of God. The behavior of the Corinthians in this matter is making them indistinguishable from the world (the other kingdom) and if they persist Paul reminds them of the consequences. In verse 9 he says, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?" He then goes on to level the sinful playing field—their behavior, their unrighteousness, is no light matter, it is on par with the lifestyle of others who will not inherit the kingdom, for "neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous people, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God" (v. 10). Paul is, once again, making a sharp distinction between who will and who will not inherit the kingdom. As in Ephesians 5 Paul points out to the Corinthians that they are not living up to the standards of the kingdom—they are living up to the standards of the kingdom in which they used to live. Thus in verse 11, after the character vices in verses 9 and 10, Paul says, "and such were some

of you."

There is another connection here with a theme we have seen before and it is found in the second part of verse 11. Again we see the kingdom of God brought up in a close connection with Paul's soteriology. Those who live as Paul describes in verses 9 and 10 will not inherit the kingdom, and what the Corinthians need to remember is that though they used to be those very people, there is something that ought to cause a definite break with their former way of life—"you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of God." This leads to yet another connection with the kingdom in Paul. This time the connection is the Spirit. Earlier, in Galatians 5, we saw the connection between inheritance of the kingdom and the fruit of the Spirit. Here in 1 Corinthians 6 the agency of the Spirit in salvation is connected to Paul's discussion of inheriting the kingdom. With these texts in mind, two more texts deserve attention.

#### ***Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 4:20-21 – The Empowering Presence in the Kingdom***

In a nutshell, Paul's concern in Romans 14 is that each believer make it his business to think of the good of others before his own. The "strong" have no right to run roughshod over the "weak" and justify it on the basis of Christian freedom. Though a believer may have the freedom to partake of various things, nothing must be allowed to become a stumbling block for others. Paul's concern is that a misuse of freedom may ultimately result in causing a brother to act against conscience, and thus apart from faith, in short, they may cause a brother to sin (vv. 14, 23). In

short, a brother in Christ should be more important than the exercise of personal freedom. A person for whom Christ died trumps personal indulgence in food and drink. As Paul puts it, "Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died" (v. 15). In the middle of this discussion, Paul gives the Romans a larger perspective in which food and drink become mere trifling things in comparison; and that larger perspective is the kingdom of God. He says in verse 17, "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." The kingdom is present and established in them by the Spirit (not by food or drink) and his gifts of righteousness, joy, and peace "translate themselves into present-day realities."<sup>10</sup> These realities are lost when, rather than pursuing "the things which make for peace and the building up of one another" (v. 19), they pursue their own personal interests. By placing personal freedom, here in the form of eating and drinking, above the good of others, they are forgetting how they received the kingdom and what should mark those who belong to it.<sup>11</sup> What is really at stake is the evidence of the present reality of the kingdom in the lives of these believers. The "spiritual harm" the strong are inflicting on the weak through the exercise of personal freedom stands in direct opposition "to what is truly important in the kingdom of God."<sup>12</sup> This text is another example in Paul of the kingdom in connection to behavior and conduct in the churches. Note further that what is most evident here is the *current* reality of the kingdom. The "already" aspect is emphasized as a ground for Paul's argument. What should characterizes life in the "already" kingdom is joyful service to one another in

the reality of a Spirit filled life.

The "already" emphasis is also evident in 1 Cor 4:20-21. Paul asserts that the kingdom of God is not just empty talk, it is about God's saving power.<sup>13</sup> When Paul says "the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power," this fits with 2:5 where he says that his gospel came in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power. The kingdom is a present reality again linked to the presence of the Spirit. With this in mind, recall that the Holy Spirit appears in the context of both Galatians 5 and 1 Corinthians 6. The Spirit is the empowering force of the kingdom.<sup>14</sup> I would suggest that the Spirit of God is actually that which connects the present reality of the kingdom with the future consummation.<sup>15</sup> The kingdom of God in Paul "occurs in such a way as to link the promise of the future reign of God with the present experience of the Spirit, with present lifestyles and priorities."<sup>16</sup>

If Colossians 1, 1 Corinthians 15, and Ephesians 1 emphasize the current reign of the risen Christ as the inauguration of the present kingdom of God, then Ephesians 5, along with Galatians 5, 1 Corinthians 6, Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 4 emphasize the new life lived out presently under Christ's Kingship.

### *Connecting with the Gospels*

The most obvious connection between the kingdom in the Gospels and the kingdom in Paul is the concern about the faith, behavior, character, and obedience that serve as the marks of the kingdom of God. If we consider just a few of the many examples taken from the synoptic Gospels, we can see clearly these four marks of the kingdom.

Unless your righteousness exceeds  
that of the Scribes and Pharisees you

cannot enter the kingdom of God (Matt 5:20).<sup>17</sup>

“It is not those who say “Lord, Lord,” but who do the will of my Father that will enter the kingdom of God” Matt 7:21.

Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child, will never enter it (Luke 18:17).

It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into hell (Mark 9:47).

Along with these explicit examples we need also to consider texts such as the ending of the Sermon on the Mount—which I take to be all about the ethics of the kingdom. Shortly after saying that not everyone who says “Lord, Lord” will enter the kingdom of God, Jesus draws an inference from the whole sermon—those who hear and practice his teachings will stand, those who hear but do not practice them will not. I do not think it is a stretch to interpret this to mean that it is only those who both hear and practice the teaching of Jesus who will enter the kingdom.

#### *Entering or Inheriting?*

In the Gospels, Jesus typically speaks of “entering” the kingdom while Paul is inclined to say that one “inherits” the kingdom. Is the difference in vocabulary significant? Paul’s inheritance language is linked to his eschatological emphasis as one who awaits the return and final victory of the risen king (1 Corinthians 15). The age ushered in by the cross and resurrection is one in which believers have a share in the kingdom but await their full inheritance—the consummated kingdom. Moreover, Paul’s concept of adoption (Ephesians 1) that is linked to his role as the missionary to the Gentiles to whom he brought a message of full acceptance

into the people of God, favors his use of “inheriting the kingdom.” Paul’s stewardship is the message that “the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph 3:6). Jesus, on the other hand, proclaimed the arrival of the kingdom in his life and ministry and the need of repentance in the light of “the gospel of God,” that is, the arrival of the kingdom (Mark 1:4-15). Believing in Jesus meant entering the kingdom.

There are additional reasons not to make too fine a distinction between entering and inheriting the kingdom. First, as Wenham points out, “The OT speaks of Israel entering and inheriting the promised land (e.g., Deut 4:1; 6:18; 16:20); the concepts are virtually synonymous and interchangeable when applied to the kingdom.”<sup>18</sup> The Israelites would both enter and inherit the land. Second, there are examples in both the Gospels and in Paul’s letters where the typical words are not used. In 1 Thess 2:12 Paul neither uses “enter” nor “inherit” but his language “implies the idea of entering.”<sup>19</sup> In that text Paul tells the Thessalonians that his work among them is for this purpose: “so that you may work in a manner worthy of the God who called you to his kingdom and glory.” In Matt 25:34, the sheep on the right hand of the King hear these words: “Come, blessed of the Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you before the foundation of the world.” So when Jesus speaks of the kingdom in terms of its final consummation, it is not the common Gospels term “enter” but, “inherit”—the term we would expect in similar contexts in Paul.

For Jesus, as with Paul, those who will ultimately inherit the kingdom will live

lives that are marked by faith in God, and love for God and neighbor. The subjects of the kingdom will live according to the teaching of the King. These are the ones who will enter and inherit the kingdom. It is also worth noting, though I can't pursue it at this point, that it is not only Spirit-transformed lives needed to enter the kingdom, what is ultimately needed is a totally transformed existence—final perfection in every way. As Paul says in 1 Cor 15:50, “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the imperishable inherit the perishable.” In order to inherit the kingdom finally—in other words to enter into the presence of the King—believers will be resurrected with new and perfect bodies suitable for life in the universally consummated kingdom. Just as Christ was enthroned only after his victory manifested at the resurrection, so too it is only after believers follow him in the final resurrection that they will be glorified with him and receive the full fruits of the victory he won for us (1 Cor 15:57).

### **The Contours of the Kingdom in Paul—Or: “Paul and the ‘Mustard-seed’ Kingdom”**

One aspect of the kingdom of God in Paul worth pursuing does not involve Paul's explicit teaching on the kingdom. It has to do with Paul himself and how we can see the contours of the kingdom in his life and ministry. This is the shape the kingdom of God takes in the life of Paul and in the lives of his readers—in other words, what the kingdom of God looks like day to day. Here I believe we see remarkable connections with the kingdom in the life and teaching of Jesus. It is often said that Paul's teaching on the kingdom has a *cruciform shape*—I think

we could also say that the kingdom of God in Paul's life has a cruciform shape. Briefly, I'd like to consider three examples of this theme in 1 Thessalonians 2; 2 Thessalonians 1; and, 2 Timothy 4.

#### **1 Thessalonians 2**

In verse 12 Paul tells the Thessalonians why he and his co-workers endure all the hardship they face: “so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory” (incidentally, in Col 4:11 Paul refers to his co-workers as “fellow workers for the kingdom of God”). The “worthy manner” of course fits in with the things considered in the second section of this paper but what I want to consider here is that this life worthy of the kingdom comes as a direct result of Paul's ministry of the gospel. Four times in this section Paul refers to the gospel. Three of these references are to “the gospel of God,” a phrase that parallels Mark's description of Jesus' preaching of the kingdom in Mark 1:14-15: “After John had been put into prison Jesus came into Galilee preaching the gospel of God, saying, ‘The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the gospel.’” The other reference to the gospel comes in verse 3 where Paul speaks of his “exhortation.” The notable thing here is the connection between the kingdom, the gospel of God, and the suffering that Paul endures. Paul's suffering in his gospel ministry is suffering for the sake of the kingdom, here specifically for the sake of the Thessalonians' entrance into the kingdom. He reminds them of the suffering and mistreatment he received in Philippi and he tells them in verse 8 that because of the affection he has for them he was glad not only to give them the gospel of God but his own life as well. Here I

think we see Paul living out the kingdom precisely in the way Jesus describes in Mark 8—suffering for his sake and for his gospel; and in Mark 10—becoming a servant of all people. So, the “labor” and the “hardship” with which Paul ministered the gospel is a reflection of the kingdom, or the contours of the kingdom described by Jesus in the Gospels. Paul’s experience in his ministry of the gospel shows us the present form of the kingdom for those who proclaim the King.

### **2 Thessalonians 1**

Suffering for the kingdom is not for Paul alone but for his readers as well. In chapter 1 Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians’ perseverance in faith and love in the midst of persecutions and afflictions. And why exactly are they suffering? In verse 5 Paul says that this is all taking place “so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which you indeed are suffering.” Again Paul speaks of a way of living that is worthy of the kingdom of God, specifically a life of faith and love, but here this theme is wedded directly to suffering for the kingdom of God. Not only this, we also see that the theme considered in the first section of this paper arises here as well—namely the rule of Christ over the enemies of the gospel and the final consummation of the kingdom. The suffering endured by the Thessalonians will be alleviated finally when Christ comes in power, I think its fair to say, “as the King,” and judges those who disobey “the gospel.” Like Paul, his readers experience suffering for the kingdom, and that suffering will cease when the reigning Christ returns to destroy once and for all the enemies of the kingdom. In the meantime, it is only through suffering that they will inherit

the kingdom.

In this way, believers are following in the path of Christ (and subsequently the path of Paul) who as a result of suffering was enthroned. Believers endure suffering now at the hands of their enemies but this suffering is not aimless or random—it will culminate in the consummation of the kingdom when the King who suffered and rose to glory returns.

### **2 Timothy 4**

At the end of his life, Paul is waiting for final vindication and entrance into the kingdom of God. His life, all the way to the end, follows the contours of the kingdom. In this text Paul is alone, having been betrayed by Demas, opposed by Alexander the coppersmith (v. 16); and deserted at his first defense—yet the Lord who stood with him at that first defense “will,” says Paul, “deliver me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom” (v. 18). At the end of his life, suffering had not dimmed Paul’s view of the kingdom; in fact it is just the opposite, in the face of what many would judge as abject failure, Paul awaits the coming of the Lord, the King, who will vindicate his suffering and deliver him into the kingdom.

On one level the life of Paul, and in particular the end of Paul’s life, was quite unremarkable. What I mean by this is that there is not much about it that appears triumphant, or victorious. To many people Paul’s life would not look very *kingdom-like*. But the kingdom Paul preached does not on the surface of things appear to be a very impressive kingdom. Yet it is precisely at this point that we may perceive that Paul fully grasped, accepted, and rejoiced in the kingdom preached by Jesus. This is the kingdom

that comes like a man who plants seed and then goes away, and while he's away it grows secretly, quietly, and ultimately bears much fruit; this is the kingdom that is like a sower who sows seed, and much of it either doesn't take root or it takes root and seems to grow but for various reasons, and however promising it may have appeared, it fails to mature. Yet, the seed that does take root grows up and ultimately bears a harvest that is beyond belief. This is the mustard seed kingdom—a kingdom with unremarkable beginnings but unimaginable endings.

In Acts Paul went about preaching the kingdom of God, and this is precisely the way Luke four times describes Paul's ministry (19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 30). Indeed, Paul's calling and commission was to turn people from one kingdom to another. In chapter 7 Paul is told that he is being appointed as a minister and a witness "to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God." And an integral part of this witnessing was grasping and preaching a particular, unavoidable fact, namely, as Paul reminded his churches, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." If ever the kingdom of God in Paul is identical with the kingdom of God in the Gospels, it is precisely at this point. It is the kingdom that comes only through suffering and the cross.

### **Conclusion**

This article represents only a short excursion into an important topic for biblical studies, teaching, and preaching. In addition to the topics in this article, a study of the role and importance of the kingdom in Paul's gospel ministry could provide fruitful results for understanding the place of the kingdom in Paul's overall

theology. It seems reasonable to assume that Luke's use of "kingdom" in Acts in relation to Paul's proclamation and ministry would be an acceptable description for Paul. Is there evidence in Paul's epistles to substantiate this assumption? Given that the kingdom is associated with two major Pauline topics, salvation and Christian ethics, and given the fact that Paul's life and ministry so clearly resemble Jesus' teaching on the kingdom, there is a need to explore this topic further. A related question, and in a real sense the central question, has to do with overall place of the kingdom in Paul's theology. Is it central to Paul's theology or is it simply one of many important concepts? That is a large question, but one that deserves an answer.

For now here are the basic observations about the kingdom in Paul. For Paul, salvation is grounded in the crucified and risen Christ who, as a result of his resurrection, sits enthroned as King in majesty and will return to bring his kingdom to its appointed fulfillment. For Paul, those who believe in the King will inherit that fulfilled kingdom. In the meantime, their citizenship in the kingdom must be evident in the present. The true inheritors of the kingdom will manifest the kingdom in their lives and behavior. For Paul, the present reality of the kingdom means suffering in ministry and for the sake of the Gospel. We can see the kingdom in precisely the way Jesus taught it in the experience of Paul. For Paul, like Jesus, the kingdom means the cross and suffering as the only way to glory. From this it is safe to say that Paul is not far from the kingdom of God.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See the article by Todd Miles in this issue of *SBJT* for some examples of biblically deficient views of the kingdom.

<sup>2</sup>For a careful comparison of the kingdom in the Gospels and the kingdom in Paul see, David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). Two other particularly helpful comparisons can be found in Ben Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World: A Comparative Study of New Testament Eschatology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), and Karl Paul Donfried, *Paul, Thessalonica, and Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

<sup>3</sup>Richard B. Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study of Paul's Soteriology* (2d ed.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 34-35. Gaffin also discusses the connection between Col 1:18 and 1 Cor 15:20 (*ibid.*, 39).

<sup>4</sup>Including parallel passages in the Gospels, there are at least fifteen explicit references of Psalm 110:1 alone in the New Testament. If possible allusions are counted the number rises significantly. For a study of the role of this Psalm in early Christian writing see, David M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973). Hay's Appendix contains a thorough list of quotes and allusions to Psalm 110 in the New Testament and early Christian literature (*ibid.* 163-66).

<sup>5</sup>C. E. Hill argues convincingly for a chiastic structure in verses 24-28 with the destruction of the last enemy, death, at the center and with "the end" (v. 24) corresponding to the Son subjecting himself to God (v.28). "Paul's Understanding of Christ's Kingdom in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28," *Novum Testamentum*, 30 (1988): 300.

<sup>6</sup>David Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 710. Both the chiastic, i.e., non-linear construction of 24-28, and the simultaneous arrival of the imperishable and immortal with the swallowing up of death (vv. 50-54), argue for an "already-not yet" kingdom of God, rather than a clear presentation of a millennial kingdom in this particular text. Arguments both for and against a future millennial kingdom based on this text must recognize that our concerns at this point are not Paul's main concerns. This can be seen from the fact that advocates of both the amillennial view and the premillennial view claim that this text supports their position. Perhaps the reason both sides equally claim this text is because it explicitly supports neither view.

<sup>7</sup>Adolf Schlatter, *The Theology of the Apostles* (trans. Andreas Köstenberger; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 273.

<sup>8</sup>The difference between Jesus' typical "enter the kingdom of God" versus Paul's "inheriting" the kingdom of God do not seem to be that great. Paul's inheritance language is linked to his strong eschatological emphasis as well as to his theology of adoption and his role as missionary to the Gentiles, to whom he brought a message of full acceptance into the people of God. As Wenham points out, "The OT speaks of Israel entering and inheriting the promised land (e.g., Deut 4:1; 6:18; 16:20); the concepts are virtually synonymous and interchangeable when applied to the kingdom." Citing Witherington (*Jesus, Paul and the End of the World*, 52) Wenham points out that 1 Thess 2:12 basically refers to "entering" the kingdom, though I am not wholly convinced that he is correct to cite Matt

19:29 in which Jesus says that those who left everything for his sake “will inherit eternal life” as support (*Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity*, 72). On the other hand, Matt 25:34 is a good example of Jesus using the word “inherit.” What is most interesting here is that this text describes events at the eschatological final judgment. Like Paul, when Jesus refers to finally “entering” the kingdom of God, he uses the word “inherit.”

<sup>9</sup>*huios tēs apeitheias* in 2:1, and *tous huios tēs apeitheias* in 5:6.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 741.

<sup>11</sup>“Because it (the revelation of the kingdom of God) takes place inwardly in the believers, God’s kingdom is established by the Holy Spirit. And because God’s gracious work is effected by his Spirit, it is not received by eating and drinking.” Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God* (trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 258.

<sup>12</sup>Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 856.

<sup>13</sup>Ben Witherington, *Jesus, Paul, and the End of the World*, 69.

<sup>14</sup>I’m grateful to James Hamilton for this particular turn of phrase.

<sup>15</sup>I can’t pursue it here, but I believe that a study of these texts along with Ephesians 1, where the Spirit is the inheritance of final salvation, the power that raised Jesus from the

dead, and the power at work in the lives of believers would yield very fruitful results and further insights into the kingdom of God in Paul.

<sup>16</sup>Frances Young, “Paul and the Kingdom of God” in *The Kingdom of God and Human Society* (ed. by R. S. Barbour; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), 245.

<sup>17</sup>It is sometimes thought that this text refers to the imputed righteousness of Christ. That is, the exceeding righteousness of which Jesus speaks is his own righteousness that God counts to the believer in justification. As important as that doctrine is, it is not the issue in Matt 5:20. In a sermon concerned with right acting and doing, the concept of imputed righteousness is not the focus here. Besides all the various commands, and the warnings against following traditions and wrong interpretations of the law, Jesus warns against giving to the poor, praying, and fasting “like the hypocrites do” (6:2, 6, 16). Jesus speaks of the actions that flow from and reveal a transformed heart. The righteousness promoted in the Sermon on the Mount is the righteousness that must mark the followers of Jesus, so Jesus ends the sermon with an illustration about the kind of fruit produced by both good and bad trees (7:16-20). The exceeding righteousness is the good fruit borne in evidence of a heart devoted to Jesus and his teaching. After all, Jesus commends “everyone who hears these words of mine and does them” (7:24). For a good and applicable discussion on this very issue, see John Piper, *What Jesus Demands from the World*

(Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 204-211. Piper, moreover, shows that Jesus is not teaching we (believers) must “out-Pharisee the Pharisees” (191), or attain some sort of perfection now (211), or that righteousness is the basis for our acceptance with God (210). On the other hand, Jesus isn’t making mere suggestions for good ways to live. Our lives must necessarily be “a demonstration of our location.” There must be evidence of the new life we have as a result of God’s mercy in Christ. As Piper explains it, “What I mean by the *demonstration* is that the way we live shows our location. It does not create our location. God establishes our location through faith alone. But he has ordained that it be fitting for the location to have a demonstration in the world. This is the righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. It is necessary, not optional. That is, Jesus assumes that if there is no demonstration of our location in God’s favor, then the location does not exist” (210).

<sup>18</sup>Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity*, 76.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.* Wenham cites Witherington, *Jesus Paul and the End of the World*, 52.