

More on the Kingdom of God – for Week 1 of *Building the Kingdom*

For the next six weeks, we are going to be talking about building the kingdom of God. In order to talk about building the kingdom, we first need to have some idea of what we even mean by God's kingdom. The following may be helpful. There are some more discussion questions at the end.

"The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is near" (Mark 1:15)

These are Jesus' first words in Mark's Gospel. What is he talking about? What time? What is to be fulfilled? What does it have to do with the kingdom of God? . . . Jesus and his fellow Jews shared a common perspective on the world. They believed in a God who had created everything there is and pronounced it good. But they also knew that God's world was not as he had intended it to be. Creation was broken. Humans, despite being made in God's image, were estranged from God. The Jews knew that

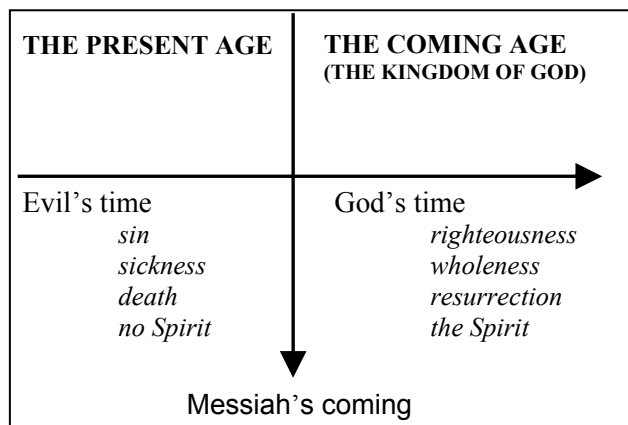


Figure 1. Jewish expectations in Jesus' day
(figures from Fee's *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*)

God had chosen them to be the ones through whom creation would be healed. Indeed, as depicted in Figure 1, they awaited the arrival of the Messiah, God's anointed one, who would bring about God's kingdom, healing all of creation and restoring everyone to right relationship with God. The coming of the Messiah would be the climax of history. It would be the time to which God's people had been pointing for nearly 2000 years. This would be Isaiah's "new thing." Exile would be ended. Sins would be forgiven. Evil would be banished. It would be God's time. It would be God's kingdom. God would give his people "a new Spirit." Everyone would know God in their own hearts (see Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Jesus the Messiah

Jesus came talking about the fulfillment of this Jewish hope and demonstrating the reality of God's kingdom. In God's kingdom there could be no blind or lame, so Jesus made the blind see and the lame walk. Though most Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, some did. In the years immediately after Jesus' resurrection, these followers of Jesus, all of whom were Jewish, had a problem. They proclaimed to all who would listen that Jesus truly was the long-expected Messiah, but it was also clear that evil and tragedy and suffering were still present in the world. Using Figure 1 as a guide, it's as if the Messiah had come, but the Kingdom of God had not! To the average Jew, the answer was simple – Jesus wasn't really the Messiah, hence, for them, the world would still have to await the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Already/Not yet

But Jesus' disciples had seen, touched, and eaten with the risen Christ. They knew that God's anointed had indeed come. Thus, the problem was not with Jesus but with the Jewish perspective depicted in Figure 1. In the writings of the New Testament, we see a new perspective emerging, as depicted in Figure 2.

Yes, Jesus was the Messiah. Yes, God's kingdom had come ~ but not yet in all its fullness! The time of renewal had begun with the Messiah's coming but the consummation of this transformation would await

his return. The Christians came to understand that they lived “between times” when God’s kingdom had come *already*, but *not yet*. I really can’t overemphasize how important is our understanding of this “already/not yet” perspective. When Paul writes that Christians are the ones on whom the “ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor 10:11) he means exactly that! This framework determined everything about the early Christians – how they lived, how they thought, what they wrote, how they worshipped . . . everything. The new order had begun. They were new creations (2 Cor 5:17). They were now the people of the Spirit. . . and, truly, so are we!

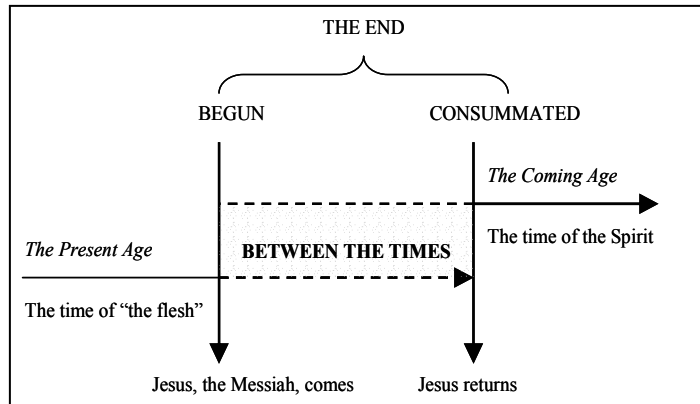


Figure 2. The Christians’ new perspective: already/not yet

As Gordon Fee writes, we are empowered by God’s Spirit to live the life of the future, of God’s kingdom, in the present age. We are to be, in Paul’s phrase, “ambassadors for Christ,” carrying God’s message of reconciliation and hope to the world, in what we do and say every day. We are new creations not just for our own sakes but for the sake of all the world. Paul understood that in his journeys he was crisscrossing the Mediterranean founding colonies of a new human race, a people born from above, born of the Spirit (John 3). St. Andrew is just such

a colony. It can be hard for us to think of ourselves this way . . . but that is the nature of transformation. We may not always feel like new creations. We certainly don’t always act like new creations. But we are. *This is the real world.* Glory be to God!

Other Possibilities for Discussion

Gordon Fee, a leading NT scholar, recently wrote that if he were going to return to be the pastor of a local church (as he once was), he “. . . would set about with a single-minded passion to help a local body of believers recapture the New Testament church’s understanding of itself as an eschatological¹ community.” Review again the two figures in the today’s lesson. Discuss what they mean. Do you understand why the Christians came to a different perspective from the Jews? How does the Christian perspective differ? What do you think Dr. Fee means by “eschatological community.” Consider the following:

- Why do you think that Dr. Fee would say such a thing? Why is this so important?
- How might understanding ourselves as an eschatological community change us – our lives, our priorities – even our congregation?
- Richard Hays writes, “. . . the redemptive power of God has already broken into the present time, and the form of this world is passing away.” What is to be our role in the consummation of God’s kingdom? Should we quietly await Jesus’ return and watch the present world “pass away?” Or are we to do all we can to renew creation and make God’s kingdom a present reality? If renewal is our responsibility, what can we actually do?

¹ Eschatology is from the Greek word, *eschaton*, meaning “last things;” it has to do with the end-times. The figures in the study are eschatological frameworks depicting related, but contrasting, views of the end times.