



God's Kingdom: Gift, Hope, and Vision

Of all the biblical symbols, there is none that has fired the imagination more for its earthly realization than the Kingdom of God. Nor is there a biblical symbol which is any the more elusive. For although the Kingdom dawned in the earthly ministry of Jesus (Luke 11:20; Matt 12:28), so that Jesus' words and deeds disclosed and made way for God's reign in historical time, God's Kingdom has not arrived in its fullness. It is still a future hope, for which we pray.

But how truly "future" is that hope? Is it a "future" set *beyond* the future of historical existence in a new age which shall come and displace this one (including the cosmos and history)? Yes and no. On the one hand, yes, it is only when the end has come that "all things will be subjected to him" and "God will be everything to everyone" (1 Cor 15:24, 28). But on the other hand, no, the Christian community prays, "Your Kingdom come," followed by the parallel line, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The future Kingdom for which we pray is hoped for in the *temporal future*, as well as *beyond* it; otherwise this petition is devoid of meaning. So Luther in his *Small Catechism* commented, "the Kingdom of God comes of itself, without our prayer"—for the Kingdom is truly God's, and we cannot bring it into being—"but we pray in this petition that it may also come to us," for God wills to rule in history, as well as beyond history.

The biblical symbol of the Kingdom is thus an all encompassing one for human life. God's reign *has already appeared* in history, as the biblical record attests, particularly in Israel's history and in the earthly ministry of Jesus; God's reign *will come* beyond history when all things are subjected to him; and God's reign is *present* whenever through his Word this earthly life is transformed according to his will. Past, present, and future—like the potter's clay—have been and ever will be molded under the reign of God. And this has implications for the church's self-understanding and mission. Especially since the Christian community knows that God's reign shall most certainly come "of itself" when God so wills, that community will align itself already in the present with God's future reign. Such thinking obviously calls the church to seek to understand God's will for the ongoing present and to be engaged in social responsibility.

The essays which follow center on the Kingdom of God in many and various ways. *John Halvorson* discusses the concept of the Kingdom as it relates to ministry today, drawing upon his own exegetical work and from the insights of Reinhold Niebuhr. *Dennis Duling* reviews—with brevity and precision—how Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom has been understood in the history of the church and in theological investigation. He exposes the weaknesses of past formulations and brings us up to date on present attempts. *Stanley Hauerwas* and *Mark Sherwindt* explore the concepts of the Kingdom in Walter Rauschenbusch and Wolfhart Pannenberg, offer critique in both cases, and propose a way of considering church and Kingdom as intersecting (without

making them identical) so that the concept of the Kingdom is not an abstraction, and that the church might be a witnessing community. *Carlyle Haaland* shows how one of the understandings of the Kingdom in American religion (identified by H. Richard Niebuhr) has come front and center in an age of narcissism, and he offers a theological critique of it. *Marc Kolden* asks how it is possible to speak of the Kingdom today. More specifically, how does one interpret eschatological language? He reviews proposals in recent theological movements (process theology, Teilhard, theology of hope, and liberation theology) and makes a constructive proposal of his own.

Our Resources section contains four essays. *Herman Diers* addresses the escalating arms race, including its consequent threat of nuclear warfare, and offers not only a perspective on the matter but also calls for a more vigorous response from the churches. His essay is informative and could serve as a resource for others in addressing this important issue. *Kent Johnson* writes on Christian nurture in and for the Kingdom of God, drawing on recent works in growth and development theory. *Lamar Cope* reviews current perspectives on ethics in relation to the New Testament and discusses certain issues in particular (Jesus and liberation, and issues in sexuality). And *George Bass* introduces us to the “story sermon” and the growing, significant literature in that area. Finally, the issue concludes with reviews of significant books.

A.J.H