



The Kingdom of God: An Ecclesial Space for Peace

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I. THE KINGDOM AT THE MERCY OF IDEALISTIC THEOLOGY: THE RECENT HISTORY

“Theology has yet to digest the radical change from the ethical to the eschatological understanding of the Kingdom of God.”¹ So writes Wolfhart Pannenberg in his attempt to provide a theology that ingests the significance of the Kingdom of God as the central reality of the Christian proclamation. If Pannenberg is correct in his claim that theology has hardly begun to appreciate the systematic significance of the eschatological focus required by the language of the Kingdom, this is even more so the case in theological ethics. What at once seemed such a promising resource for ethical reflection threatens to dissolve in a sea of scholarly qualifications and ethical generalities that offer little direction for the practical life of Christian men and women and/or the role of the church in society.

The discovery in the nineteenth century of the centrality of the Kingdom of God in the preaching of Jesus, a discovery that certainly was correct, seemed to have offered a fresh perspective on Christian ethics. Protestant ethics in particular gravitated toward this new-found ideal of the “Kingdom” because of its traditional commitment to formulating a scripturally based ethic. In its search for such

¹Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 52. When Pannenberg seeks to explore the “systematic significance” of the eschatological focus required by the language of the Kingdom of God, his own project directs him to a discussion of metaphysics and the “ontological priority of the future” to suggest how such a focus revolutionizes Christian thought. This essay presumes that such a direction is unhelpful for two reasons. First, we question whether even metaphysically the ontological priority of the future makes sense. This involves the issue of how that which is an abstraction of what is not even existent (the not-yet, the future) can be regarded as preeminently concrete (presupposed as the ground of every existent being, and of being itself). Secondly, and more importantly, such a metaphysical direction is misguided to the extent that ethical discourse is by definition practical, having to do with what is contingent. Thus, to move the discussion of the “ethical” significance of the eschatological focus of the language of the Kingdom in the direction of the abstract and theoretic is counterproductive.

an ethic, however, Protestants often settled for biblical themes or concepts such as the law-gospel dialectic or *agape*. While theologically suggestive, such biblical themes and concepts were not easily translated into concrete ethical norms; such concrete norms that were formulated were not easily traced to or demonstrably derived from Scripture. Thus, Protestant attempts to provide

concrete ethical analysis often fell back on some kind of “natural law” ethic which, however, lacked the more explicit rigor of Roman Catholic natural law discourse. The emergence of focus on the concept of the Kingdom of God seemed to promise a way to move beyond this difficulty, for this biblical concept provided everything that was needed, from global vision to concrete specificity of conduct, for the development of a Christian ethic.

Moreover, there was the added advantage that the “Kingdom ideal” synthesized both practically and conceptually the relation between personal and social ethics. The social and political character of the very image of “kingdom” serves as a reminder that any Christian ethic that is not first of all a social ethic is less than Christian. Early proponents of the social gospel were grasped by the political and social character of the Kingdom ideal, and the force of their exhortatory fervor was to invoke more than the call to individual conversion, but to provoke Christians to social action and change aimed at “Christianizing” the institutions of societal life. They looked to the Kingdom of God for more than an “ideal,” but for a concrete and realistic portrayal of the just society. Thus, with neither ambiguity nor equivocation Walter Rauschenbusch could maintain:

The Kingdom of God is humanity organized according to the will of God. Interpreting it through the consciousness of Jesus we may affirm these convictions about the ethical relations within the Kingdom: (a) Since Christ revealed the divine worth of life and personality, and since his salvation seeks the restoration and fulfilment of even the least, it follows that the Kingdom of God, at every stage of human development, tends toward a social order which will best guarantee to all personalities their freest and highest development. (b) Since love is the supreme love of Christ, the Kingdom of God implies a progressive reign of love in human affairs. We can see its advance wherever the free will of love supersedes the use of force and legal coercion as a regulative of the social order. This involves the redemption of society from political autocracies and economic oligarchies; the substitution of redemptive for vindictive penology; the abolition of constraint through hunger as part of the industrial system; and the abolition of war as the supreme expression of hate and the completest cessation of freedom. (c) The highest expression of love is the free surrender of what is truly our own, life, property and rights. A much lower but perhaps more decisive expression of love is the surrender of any opportunity to exploit men. No social group or organization can claim to be clearly within the Kingdom of God which drains others for its own ease, and resists the effort to abate this fundamental evil. This involves the redemption of society from private property in the natural resources of the earth, and from any condition in industry which makes monopoly profits possible. (d) The reign of love tends toward the progressive unity of mankind, but with the maintenance of individual liberty and the opportunity of nations to work out their own peculiarities and ideals.²

²Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978) 142-143.

future, but also the vision and a program for concrete change in human history. The Kingdom of God ideal was productive of guidance sufficient to direct Christian social action, or, as Rauschenbusch put it elsewhere, to articulate “the program of Christian revolution: the Kingdom of God on earth.”³ However, the conceptual relation between the image of kingdom and the concrete social and political recommendations remained unclear. The practical exhortation to move beyond the individual to the social was clear enough; conceptually, however, within this call to form the just society through Christianizing political and economic institutions, the relation between individual regeneration and social sanctification was not addressed. The question of the role of the church did arise. Clearly the church served as model and as forward flank in the social gospel’s call to action. Yet, an ecclesiology which clarified the differing character of the social relation within which the individual stood in the church and over against the world receded from focus. Church and world alike stood under the identical challenge to create a Christian social order through political democracy and fraternal socialism. Further, an ecclesiology which addressed the relations of continuity and discontinuity between the Church of Christ and the Kingdom of God went undeveloped and without critical analysis.

Rauschenbusch’s “program” was soon challenged on numerous grounds. His understanding of the Kingdom was criticized for its naivete; his uncritical appropriation of liberalism’s faith in social progress was regarded by many “realists” as far too simplistic, lacking in appreciation for the complexity of social change and the ambiguity of all attempts to secure more nearly just social arrangements. Yet such criticisms are not the most important for our purposes; for what is most decisive about such views is that Rauschenbusch and his imitators lacked any sense of the eschatological character of the Kingdom. They thought of the Kingdom as an ethical ideal that required only our willingness to bring it to completion. Therefore the tension occasioned by the Kingdom from their perspective was that between an ideal and its incomplete realization.

As a result they failed to see, as Pannenberg suggests, that the Kingdom is not to be established by human efforts but by God alone. The biblical scholars thus took the ethical stress out of the Kingdom, at least in any direct way, as they demonstrated that the Kingdom texts in the New Testament envisage cosmic revolutions and changes

far beyond anything conceivable as a consequence of man’s progressive labor. God will establish his Kingdom unilaterally. Therefore Jesus, and John the Baptizer before him, only announced the Kingdom of God, exposing every present condition under the light of the imminent future. This future is expected to come in a marvelous way from God himself; it is not simply the development of human history or the achievement of God-fearing men.⁴

³Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) 110.

⁴Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 52. Rauschenbusch was not so naive in this regard as many have claimed. In *A Theology for the Social Gospel* he writes, “The Kingdom of God is divine in its origin, progress and consummation. It was initiated by Jesus Christ, in whom the prophetic spirit came to its consummation, it is sustained by the Holy Spirit, and it will be brought to its fulfillment by the power of God in his own time. The Kingdom of God, therefore, is miraculous all the way, and is the continuous revelation of the power, the righteousness, and the love of God” (139).

This focus on the divine agency involved in the cosmic drama wherein heaven and earth are radically transformed undermined claims for the decisive significance of human progress aimed at societal reformation, at least in terms of ushering in the Kingdom of God.

Moreover, the original ethical interpretation of the Kingdom of God seemed to overlook another conceptual problem, namely that there was no clear connection between the Scriptural account of the Kingdom of God and the moral ideals advocated in its name. Thus, it was (and is) claimed that the essence of the Kingdom was love and/or justice; yet, such ideals or norms were not clearly derived from the notion of the Kingdom itself. In fact, even if to our embarrassment, the very language of the Kingdom does not call to mind categories of liberal democracy but of religious theocracy. Rauschenbusch recognized that the Kingdom ideal was in the Old Testament that of “a righteous community ordered by divine laws, governed by God’s ministers, having intercourse with the most High, and being blessed by him with the good things of life.”⁵ For Rauschenbusch, however, Jesus transformed this ideal by universalizing and spiritualizing it so that political democracy was seen as the result of as well as inherent to Jesus’ insistence on the inherent value of each individual personality.⁶ In this way, leaving Scripture far behind, Rauschenbusch was able to transform the theocratic image of the Kingdom of God into the democratic ideal of the “brotherhood of man.”

Rauschenbusch’s assumptions in this respect are clearly just that—assumptions. Scripturally there seem to be no good grounds to associate the Kingdom of God with any one form of political organization and/or to assume that it is best characterized by any one set of ethical ideals such as love and justice. As a platitude it may be unobjectionable to claim that God’s Kingdom must surely be one of love and justice, but that does little to help one understand what is the meaning and content of love and justice. Indeed, when the content of such ideals is spelled out, as we see in the case of Rauschenbusch, we begin to suspect that the language of the Kingdom is being used to underwrite ethical commitments and political strategies that were determined prior to the claims about the centrality of the Kingdom for Christian ethics. In other words, apart from vague generalities about the social and political commitments of Christians required by the Kingdom language, the concentration on the Kingdom of God does not avoid the problem that the content of any Christian ethic must be derived from extrabiblical sources.

Pannenberg is particularly interesting in this respect, since he, more than any other contemporary theologian, promises to shape his theological program in terms of the eschatological vision required by Jesus’ preaching of the Kingdom. In most of his theological expression he has been extraordinarily successful. Yet, when he turns to assessing the ethical significance of the Kingdom he sounds surprisingly like Rauschenbusch. Thus, even though he maintains that the “kingdom of God is that perfect society of men which is to be realized in history by God himself,” he also insists that it is not some formalistic idea but the utterly concrete reality of justice and love.⁷ But nowhere does Pannenberg tell us why justice and

⁵Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, 80.

⁶*Ibid.*, 165.

⁷Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 76.

love are the defining marks of the Kingdom; nor does he tell us what kind of justice or love are the Kingdom's marks, or what social expression they are to take. Rather, we are offered generalities such as,

love is the final norm of justice. Love is equipped to be the measure of justice because it is not an abstract principle. Love is a dynamic reality producing, in an ongoing process, new forms of human unity; each form surpasses its predecessor and anticipates its successor.⁸

What Pannenberg does not do is help us know by what criteria we are to determine which forms of unity in this "dynamic process" are to be identified as God's work for the upbuilding of the Kingdom. Rather, in a manner much like Rauschenbusch, he puts forward an account of love that involves the respect for the other person that he assumes to be commensurate with the development of politics that stress the notions of self-government and the sovereignty of the people.⁹ One might well agree with Pannenberg's insights concerning love and justice, their relation to freedom and equality, and the moral significance of democracies, but it remains a question whether his commitment to the language of the Kingdom in ethics makes any difference at all for his understanding or support of these ideals, norms, and strategies.

The problem here as well as with Rauschenbusch is that of abstracting the Kingdom ideal from the concrete community which it presupposes. Focus must be brought to bear not only on the eschatological fulfillment of the promise of the Kingdom, but on the concrete ecclesial community established in its name. The Kingdom of God is the hope of the people whom God has called out among all the nations. The question of ecclesiology, therefore, precedes strategy for social action. Without the Kingdom ideal, the church loses her identity-forming hope; without the church, the Kingdom ideal loses its concrete character. Once abstracted from the community it presumes the Kingdom ideal can be used to underwrite any conception of the just society.

II. JESUS AND THE KINGDOM

Such criticism, however, may be unfair as it leaves out a crucial element in the recovery of the eschatological nature of the Kingdom, namely, the centrality of Jesus for determining the nature and content of the Kingdom. For the stress on the Kingdom's eschatological reality has gone hand in hand with the insistence that the proclamation of the Kingdom's presence now and in the future cannot be separated from him who proclaims the Kingdom. Thus Pannenberg insists that

Jesus insisted upon the present and radical relevance of God's coming Kingdom. He identified love as its ultimate norm, and, by exemplifying the love of God in his own life and death, Jesus proved to be the expected *christos*, the Messiah of God, who shall establish God's kingdom on earth. The dignity of Jesus as the Christ, as the Messiah, is ~result of the way he represented and still represents for all of humanity the Kingdom of God as already determining and transforming the present by creative love. All the words and formulas of

⁸Ibid., 81.

⁹Ibid., 121.

Christology have truth to the degree they express how the future of God's Kingdom became determinative for the present of Jesus' life and, through him, for the history of mankind. In Jesus' radical devotion to the Kingdom of God, that Kingdom became present in him. In him the Kingdom is present to all men.¹⁰

Put starkly, Jesus himself is the meaning and content of the Kingdom.

Such an emphasis was not absent, however, from those that interpreted the Kingdom in less straightforwardly eschatological terms. Thus for Rauschenbusch there could be no Kingdom without the person of Jesus.

The fundamental first step in the salvation of mankind was the achievement of the personality of Jesus. Within him the Kingdom of God got its first foothold in humanity. It was by virtue of his personality that he became the initiator of the Kingdom.¹¹

For Rauschenbusch, therefore, Christianity was built up, not so much on doctrine, but on the person of its founder. For in Jesus was provided

a perfect religious personality, a spiritual life completely filled by the realization of a God who is love. All his mind was set on God and one with him. Consequently it was also absorbed in the fundamental purpose of God, the Kingdom of God. Like the idea of God, the conception of the Kingdom was both an inheritance and a creation of Jesus; he received it and transformed it in accordance with his consciousness of God. Within his mind the punitive and imperialistic elements were steeped out of it, and the elements of love and solidarity were dyed into it. The Reign of God came to mean the organized fellowship of humanity acting under the impulse of love.¹²

Rauschenbusch's commitments to liberal forms of Christology are apparent from such quotes; yet, his suggestions in this respect should be neither ignored nor easily dismissed. In spite of his language of "a perfect religious personality" his insistence on the centrality of Jesus as crucial for determining the meaning of the Kingdom is correct. Indeed in many ways it is not much different from the position of Pannenberg indicated above. It is the position of both theologians that the Kingdom cannot be reduced to an ethical ideal and that moral norms cannot be known separate from the life and death of Jesus Christ. The issue between them is how best to understand what it means to claim Jesus as the form and content of the Kingdom. For if, as Perrin argues (in *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*), the "Kingdom of God" fundamentally involves a claim about God's activity in history on behalf of his people, then what we as Christians know of God's activity is known by looking at the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Theologically and ethically the significance of Jesus for determining the meaning and content of the Kingdom implies that history assumes an importance that cannot be ignored as it often is by other forms of ethical reflection. For the particularity of Israel, Jesus, and the church must be taken up constitutively into what those who proclaim Jesus as Lord and Christ regard as

true and good and right. The Kingdom does not start with nature, with the notion that the perfec-

¹⁰Ibid., 81.

¹¹Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 151.

¹²Ibid., 155.

tion implicit in creation be reformed by divine assistance; rather, the Kingdom starts as the hope of a people called by God, which for Christians is defined by the life and death of the crucified Christ. The universal scope of the Kingdom is rooted in the universal scope of God's reign. What we can know of this God and his Kingdom is always given through the history of Israel filtered through the light of Jesus' cross.

It is the continuing claim in the Gospels that Yahweh continues to prove himself King through the work of Jesus. For through Jesus we see God's continuing rule over nature and history as they are reclaimed by his good order. Jesus does not simply proclaim the coming of the Kingdom, but he manifests its presence through his exorcisms and healing ministry.¹³ Thus, as John Gray suggests,

In the mission of Jesus there is no question but that the Reign of God was central. This is not simply the order in which the highest moral ideals are finally realized with the impulse of the Divine authority and grace. What Jesus proclaimed and authenticated, by what he did and by what he was, was the irruption into history of the effective order of the Divine King with its power to transform the situation, to release new energies, as in the healing works of our Lord, to break the domination of forces which held men bodily and spiritually in thrall, as in what Jesus' contemporaries understood as the casting out of devils, the implication of which was so pointedly stated in Jesus' declaration of the strong man despoiled in the famous Beelzebub controversy (Mk. 3:23ff, Mt. 12:25ff). The present impact of the effective Reign of the Divine King in the gospel cannot be overemphasized.¹⁴

That the Kingdom is present in Jesus is known not only by Jesus' power to renew our nature and spirit, but also in the rehabilitation of his people. The Kingdom of God is a category which presumes and creates a people. God, through Jesus, has acted and is acting to vindicate his people, so that a remnant might remain faithful to him. Among God's people the poor, the oppressed, the underprivileged play a particularly prominent role, as their reversal of fortunes proclaims that all is not well with the world. Yet, it is not their poverty, nor their oppression, nor their earthly powerlessness that makes these persons paradigmatic citizens of God's kingdom; rather, their unencumbered reception of God's forgiveness and grace sets them apart as God's people. God's people have learned to be forgiven, and as such they are a people for whom patience and prayer are a possibility.

In the Beatitudes we see nothing less than the order of God's Kingdom, the charter of his commonwealth, as we are treated to a vision of life that can occur only when a people have been formed who know who the true Lord of the world is. However, such a people is possible only because they have learned to be forgiven. For crucial to being a people capable of praying to Yahweh that his will be done on earth is that they have learned that their King is a gracious King

ready to forgive those able to be forgiven. By being able to be forgiven by God we learn how to forgive each other. That such a forgiven and forgiving community is pos-

¹³Norman Perrin, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1975) 76. It is of particular import that we stress God's reign over nature as well as over history. The peace which we share with one another is of the very same character as the peace which we as citizens of God's Kingdom share with all of creation. This sheds new light on the relevance of issues such as vegetarianism and ecology as serious ethical issues for Christians.

¹⁴John Gray, *The Biblical Doctrine of the Reign of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979) 319.

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sible is but an indication that God's rule is no utopian ideal, but a present reality that we are required to live out. There is no question of our "building" the Kingdom, but of our willingness to trust that the Kingdom was present in Jesus, is present in the church by the power of the Holy Spirit, and will be fully manifest in the second coming. Thus, we are bold to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

III. THE PEACEABLE SPACE: THE ETHICS OF THE KINGDOM

Even if focusing on Jesus as the presence of the Kingdom as well as the ground of hope for the future fulfillment of the Kingdom restores some ethical content to the notion of the Kingdom, it is still not clear what implications the emphasis on the Kingdom ought to have for our actual behavior and/or how we think about Christian ethics. For clearly it is a mistake to try to make the Kingdom into a set of ideals, as Pannenberg comes very close to doing, which it is our responsibility to try to realize in society. The tension of the Kingdom is not that caused by unrealized ideals; it is a tension between faithfulness and unfaithfulness.

Yet it is the intention of this essay to claim that the eschatological nature of the Kingdom as embodied in the ministry of Jesus does have immediate ethical implications. It does so not in the sense that the image of "kingship" means that Christians should favor monarchy over democracy or vice versa, but in the sense that we are a people who have become part of a peaceable Kingdom that has been made possible by the life and death of Jesus Christ. It is not our task to make the "world" the Kingdom; but it is our task to be a people who can witness to the world what it means to be so confident of the Lord of this world that we wish for no more than our daily bread. It is not as if we are the Kingdom, or that the church is even the beginning of the Kingdom, but that as a people Christians can begin to point to the fact that the Kingdom has been and is present in our midst.

Thus, within a world of violence and injustice Christians can take the risk of being forgiven and forgiving. They are able to break the circle of violence as they refuse to become part of those institutions of fear that promise safety by the destruction of others. As a result, some space, both psychological and physical, is created where we can be at rest from a world that knows not who is its king.

Such rest, however, is not accomplished by a withdrawal from the world, nor is it a rest in

which there is no movement. For to be a part of God's Kingdom means that we have found ourselves in the ongoing story of God with his people. That story provides us rest exactly because it trains us with the skills to face the dangers and threats of this existence with courage and patience. Rest is possible because we find that the Kingdom is not a static space or way of being, but a journey that we have been graciously offered the opportunity to undertake. To be part of that journey means that we must be a particular kind of people formed by a particular set of virtues.

In this light we can read with fresh eyes as Paul tells us that the works of the flesh, the works of the world, are plain:

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Immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21)

This is not a list of petty moralism, but a list of those forms of behavior that manifest our distrust and fear that there is no Lord, no God, that we can trust as the good Creator of this world. This is, therefore, not a matter of "personal" ethics, but an indication of the kind of character that is unacceptable in a community that not only witnesses to but manifests God's peace. In contrast to this is the community that knows that the

fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against these such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:22-23)¹⁵

That the fruit of the Spirit is such is no accident as we can risk being peaceful in a violent world, risk being kind in a competitive society, risk being faithful in an age of cynicism, risk being gentle among those who admire the "tough," risk love when it may not be returned, because we have the confidence that in Christ we have been reborn into a new reality.

IV. THE KINGDOM AND THE CHURCH

We presently are, and for some time have been, uncomfortable with making strong claims of some kind of identity between the church and the Kingdom of God. For some the church has been a category of discomfort, even to the point of virtual silence. For others, the strong relation between the Kingdom and the church has been singularly prominent to the point of constructing an ecclesiology which resembled in form, if not also to some extent in content, the revolutionary cadres of Leninist Marxism.¹⁶ We rightly feel uncomfortable with such strong claims, but not because a strong relation between the concrete church and the Kingdom of God ought not to be drawn. Rather, we are uncomfortable because neither the church nor the Kingdom of God are what these liberation-theological colleagues claim them to be. We also rightly feel uncomfortable with those who would contend that the Kingdom of God is exhausted in the life of the church, for we cannot help but ask in light of our experience of ecclesial life whether this is all there is.¹⁷ Of

course, there is more to the Kingdom of God than the church. This more, however, is not grounded in metaphysical fiat, but in the stories of God preserved in our own traditions, which commend us to be ever watchful for the

¹⁵We would like to express special appreciation to Dr. James Tabor, University of Notre Dame, for helping us understand better Paul's use of the Kingdom of God.

¹⁶For further treatment of this matter, read Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1976) in conjunction with Dennis P. McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology; Practical Theologies in Creative Conflict* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981).

¹⁷Thus, stark contrast is drawn between our parsing of the sense of incompleteness in our experience of ecclesial life and our expectation of the Kingdom and Pannenberg's approach where the metaphysical claim of the ontological priority of the future serves as the fundamental substantiation of the distinction between church and Kingdom. See *Theology and the Kingdom of God*, 78.

time when "God has put all things in subjection under his feet," "when all things are subjected to him...that God may be everything to everyone" (1 Corinthians 15:27, 28).

From the perspective we have been developing, the church as the community formed by Jesus' story is not incidental for understanding God's Kingdom. For, following the Pauline admonitions above, the virtues that form and are formed within the church are in fact a foretaste of the Kingdom. To be sure, the church is not the Kingdom, but neither is the life which Christians share together something less than the Kingdom's inbreaking. For the hope necessary to sustain the journey and pilgrim alike is in fact the first fruits of the Kingdom, which we know to be God's will for the whole of creation.