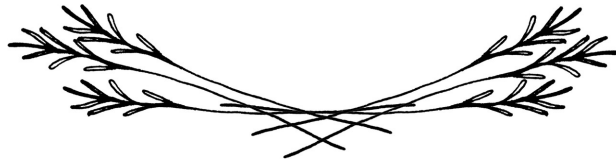


WEEK 1

# THE KINGDOM OF GOD



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Churches of Christ have long emphasized the close relationship between the kingdom of God and the church. Such an emphasis is entirely appropriate since the New Testament envisions the church and the kingdom in extremely similar terms.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps we have emphasized it a little too strongly, for Scripture does not present the kingdom of God as completely identical to the church; they are different concepts.<sup>2</sup> And yet, the church is the current earthly manifestation of the kingdom of God, the people who exhibit God's reign in the world now, who live within the kingdom even as they await its full revelation. If you are looking for evidence of God's kingdom today, the place to look is the church. Biblical teaching about the kingdom of God contributes to a better appreciation of the church's role within God's plan of salvation.

The first words out of the mouth of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark consist of an announcement that the kingdom of God would soon commence (Mark 1:15). Such an announcement would have been received by Jesus' contemporaries with, perhaps, a mix of anticipation (the oppressed crowds), trepidation (the political leaders), and disbelief (nearly everyone). For hundreds of years, Judah had been dominated by

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<sup>1</sup> See Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2014), who largely seeks to affirm the close relationship between church and kingdom.

<sup>2</sup> See Luke 12:32, where the community of Jesus (later to be called the church) would receive the kingdom, and so cannot be identical to it. The only passage that applies the label "kingdom" directly to the church is Rev 1:6.

foreign powers, from the Assyrians, to the Babylonians, to the Persians, Greeks, and now the Romans. While some first-century Jews no doubt longed for the time when God would establish his kingdom, others had probably long since ceased holding their breath.

The announcement by Jesus signaled the impending fulfillment of a variety of Old Testament promises. To be sure, God has always been king, and in that sense he has had a kingdom.<sup>3</sup> But the prophets had in varying ways envisioned a time when God would reign as king more fully and visibly than he currently did. The pivotal promise appears in 2 Samuel 7. God would establish David's dynasty, guaranteeing that one of his descendants would always reign over Israel (vv. 12–16). Through this “son of David,” God would reign, for the son of David would also be the “son of God” (v. 14).

It quickly became apparent that the immediate descendants of David in no way lived up to the great promise of 2 Samuel 7. Though Solomon accomplished some great things (1 Kings 3–10), he also oppressed the people (1 Kings 12:4), promoted idolatry (1 Kings 11:1–8), and indirectly caused the division of the kingdom into two separate nations (Judah and Israel) following his death (1 Kings 12:1–15). And most of the other kings of Judah and Israel weren't even that good. Even while the Davidic dynasty was going strong, Isaiah longed for a time when “a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse” (Isa 11:1). This new king from David's line—Jesse was David's father (1 Sam 16:1)—would bear the divine Spirit and would judge the people with righteousness, lifting up the poor and slaying the wicked (Isa 11:2–5). In his days, there would be universal peace, even between animals and men, so much so that children need have no fear of

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<sup>3</sup> For OT passages mentioning the kingship of God, see Psa 47:2; 93:1; 95:3; 97:1; 98:6; 99:1; cf. 1 Sam 8:7.

poisonous snakes (vv. 6–9). The reign of this king would usher in a time of paradise, and God would reign through him.

Other prophets present their own visions of what it would look like when God reigns, when he establishes his kingdom. Ezekiel, a priest, imagines an enormous temple (chs. 40–48) from which flows a great river nourishing life-giving trees (47:1–12) and, most importantly, God himself inhabits this temple (43:5). God will live among his people. Micah imagines God as a shepherd who would “assemble the lame and gather the outcasts” to be his kingdom (4:6–8). Sometimes in these visions of God’s kingdom, the Gentile nations flock to Zion to learn God’s will and join in worshipping him (cf. Mic 4:1–3; Isa 2:2–4; cf. Isa 56:1–8; 60). Often it was imagined that twelve tribes of Israel would be regathered under one king, the new David (Jer 23:5–6; Ezek 37:15–28).

And so, though some people may have doubted the sanity of Jesus, no one could doubt his meaning when he declared that the time had finally arrived when God would begin to reign. Indeed, Jesus was the one through whom God would inaugurate his kingdom; he was the messiah, as Peter and the apostles finally realized (Mark 8:29). When he cast out demons, the kingdom had come near (Luke 11:20). When he healed people of their diseases, he engaged in battle with the evil forces arrayed against God (Luke 13:16). He fought with Satan in the wilderness, and he overcame (Matt 4:1–11). His twelve chosen disciples (Mark 3:13–19) represented the regathered tribes of Israel (cf. Luke 22:30), just as he also attracted followers from roughly the geography of David’s kingdom (Matt 4:23–25). He was the one, as Isaiah prophesied, on whom the spirit rested (Luke 4:16–21). He was the son of David whose throne would be established forever (Matt 1:1).

But he was different than what had been anticipated, and he spoke of a different kind of kingdom than what was expected. Not only was he David's son, but he was David's lord (Matt 22:41–46). In the kingdom preached by Jesus, blessings were pronounced on the poor in spirit, the merciful, the peacemakers (Matt 5:3–12). Jesus' kingdom was one that welcomed sinners (Mark 2:15–16; Luke 7:36–50) and prostitutes (Matt 21:31–32) and—worse yet—Gentiles (cf. Isa 2:2–4) while the most religious individuals were threatened with exclusion (Matt 8:11–12). This king, this expected one, who healed the sick and opened the eyes of the blind and preached the gospel to the poor (Matt 11:2–6), unexpectedly refused to proclaim himself king openly (John 6:15; cf. Mark 1:24, 44; 3:11–12) and did not take up arms against Israel's enemy, Rome (Matt 26:52). Indeed, just the opposite: he allowed himself to be mocked, tortured, and crucified by Rome. Certainly an odd type of king.

Yet the crucifixion was central to Jesus' notion of the kingdom. It was, after all, at the moment of crucifixion when Jesus received his royal crown (Mark 15:17) and hung under a sign proclaiming him king (15:26). He had warned his disciples that this was going to happen (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34) and that they themselves would have to do similarly (8:34). In Jesus' kingdom, the first would be last (10:31) and the leaders would be servants (10:42–45; John 13:1–10).

The citizens of Jesus' kingdom would be characterized by self-sacrifice (Matt 25:31–46), love (22:34–30), and commitment to one another (18:15–18). They would live by an elevated ethic, beyond normal interpretations of Moses' law (Matt 5:17–48). Not just adultery, but even lust was prohibited. Not just murder, but even hate was forbidden. Loving neighbors was fine, but citizens of this new kingdom would love their enemies. They would go the extra mile and turn the other cheek. They would do

their righteous deeds to be noticed not by men but by God (6:1–18). They would trust God to provide their daily needs as they sought above all his kingdom (6:25–34). They would refuse to judge others but would walk the strait and narrow path (7:1–14). By living out the teachings of Jesus, they would prove themselves worthy of entering the kingdom of heaven (Matt 7:21).<sup>4</sup>

When “all authority in heaven and on earth” has been given to Jesus following his suffering and resurrection (Matt 28:18)—that is, following his victory over death and the evil powers (Col 2:15; Heb 2:14–15)—clearly what Jesus has been announcing throughout his ministry has now come to pass: he is king; the kingdom of God has begun. If the kingdom does not appear as we might have guessed from the prophetic visions, Jesus himself had cautioned us: only those who are born again can see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). Only renewed eyes of faith can discern the reign of God in the small group of Jews who stubbornly insist that someone crucified as a traitor had truly been and truly is the Messiah, the king in a newly established kingdom. When people accept this message and obey the teachings of Jesus the Messiah (Christ), God transfers them out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of his dear son (Col 1:13).

But the kingdom of God is not yet fully revealed. Jesus inaugurated it, but has not yet brought it to completion. We still pray for God’s kingdom to come (Matt 6:10) because we long for the time when all creation will bow before Jesus and acclaim him lord (Phil 2:9–11; Rev 5:13). The church is an outpost of the kingdom of God now, a community already living under the rule of God in accordance with the ethic Jesus

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<sup>4</sup> On Matthew’s peculiar use of the term “kingdom of heaven” rather than “kingdom of God,” as in the other Gospels, see Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Leiden: Brill, 2007; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

established, looking forward to inheriting the kingdom (Rom 8:17; cf. 1 Cor 6:9; 15:50) at the consummation of all things.

More than a century ago, Alfred Loisy wrote, “Jesus announced the kingdom, and it is the church that came.”<sup>5</sup> The church may seem a disappointment in comparison with the expectations created by Jesus’ kingdom announcement. Perhaps such disappointment is in part due to the failure of Christians to embody the kingdom message of Jesus. The church ought to find its identity in “Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of God and its instantiation in a community of disciples, which already manifests, in the character of its life, the nature of God’s coming universal rule.”<sup>6</sup> Or, as Paul would have it, “the rule of God takes effect in the present in the fruit of the Spirit and in the gifts of the Spirit.”<sup>7</sup> All too often in churches of Christ, it seems, we have equated the kingdom of God with the church—often in a battle against premillennialism—for the purpose of taming the kingdom, bringing it down to the normal, everyday level of the church. It would be more in keeping with Jesus’ teaching to magnify the church as the present manifestation of God’s kingdom, and therein find our mission and calling.

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<sup>5</sup> Alfred Loisy, *L’Évangile et l’Église* (3d ed.; Bellevue: Chez l’auteur, 1904), 155 : “Jésus annonçait le royaume, et c’est l’Église qui est venue.”

<sup>6</sup> Richard Bauckham, “Kingdom and Church According to Jesus and Paul,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 18.1 (1996): 1–26, at 14.

<sup>7</sup> Bauckham, “Kingdom and Church,” 16.

## Questions for Discussion

1. How is the church related to the kingdom of God?
2. Is the kingdom of God present or future?
3. How did the prophets imagine the kingdom of God? Where do these visions find their fulfillment?
4. Does the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God help to give purpose to our lives as Christians?