

The Four Stages of the Kingdom of God
By Rev. Robert Mackey

Ephesians 1:11-14 “In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: that we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory” (KJV).

This scripture relates directly to the kingdom of God. The kingdom is spoken of elsewhere as being an inheritance. Since there are differing ideas concerning the kingdom, there have been put forth differing ideas concerning this passage, without much effort at harmonizing them.

What Paul is saying first is that he and the other disciples had believed prior to the congregation at Ephesus, i.e. “who first trusted in Christ.” Then he says that they also believed once they heard the “word of truth – the Gospel.” After they believed, they received a deposit, or down-payment of what they were to inherit later. That deposit given in earnest was the Holy Spirit. According to Paul, they would only possess the earnest of the inheritance until something significant happened later. That “something” was the redemption of the “purchased possession.”

Because Paul doesn’t come right out and say what these terms mean, we must look elsewhere to find their meaning via *Sola Scriptura* – “Scripture interprets Scripture.” Since this passage is directly tied to the eschatology of the kingdom, then there have been disagreements on the terms themselves, the timing of it, and thus the passage entirely.

The only way to understand the timing of the kingdom, is to refer to the Olivet Discourse, i.e. Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. Reading these passages together is the only way that one can come away with a proper understanding of what is being said. The failure to apply this principle has led some to embrace the bizarre scheme of “hyper-dispensationalism,” which teaches that the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are somehow two separate kingdoms. However, the Word cannot be broken, and this idea comes from a complete failure to interpret the Bible with a consistent and historical hermeneutic.

The most ancient understanding of the passage in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21, though clearly not the only one, is the “partial-preterist” one. The word “preterist” comes from a Latin word meaning “fulfilled, past.” A few names holding this view are Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Wesley, Matthew Henry, Jonathan Edwards and so on. This view takes the time indicators in the text, and the context of the text literally to mean what they say. For example, the context of Matthew 24 is found in chapter 23, when Jesus rebukes the scribes and Pharisees and pronounces judgment upon apostate Israel and predicts that their “house will be left desolate,” a certain warning that

when He departed the temple, as in Ezekiel, He would take the presence of God with Him and thus it would remain empty and, as in Ezekiel, would eventually be destroyed. He pronounced that all “these things” that He had warned them of, including that the kingdom of God would be taken away from them and given to “another” in Matthew 21, would come upon “this generation.” A Biblical generation being 40 years, and Jesus speaking these things around 30 AD, these things certainly DID come upon “that generation. Within 40 years, their temple was destroyed by Titus and his Roman armies, and thus, the Old Covenant economy was forever ended.

The focus then of the Olivet Discourse becomes not the “second coming of Christ,” but the coming of the new kingdom of God, to which we as Christians belong. The phrase “end of the world” (KJV) is actually translated “end of the age.” Thus the focus is not on the end of the planet, but the end of the Old Covenant age, and the bringing in of the New Covenant, and the promised kingdom. Thus the comings spoken of in the passage, have not to do with the physical coming of Christ, which is yet to come, but of His “coming into His kingdom” (Matt. 16:28), and His coming in judgment upon apostate Israel as predicted in Matthew 23. The references to “coming in clouds”, are not then referring to Christ’s visible descent, but are a direct reference to the Old Testament book of Daniel chapter 7:13, which shows the same thing: Christ coming “on the clouds” and receiving the kingdom. Later on in Daniel, in verse 22, it says that the Saints possessed the kingdom, which they did exactly at the same time as Christ received it in verse 13, for He was serving as our federal head, in the same way that Adam served as our federal head in the fall.

However, let me briefly say that I concur at this point with the dispensationalists and historical preterists who see that there is yet to come another end to our own age at the physical return of Christ. To be forced to hold to a “two age” model is not necessary. There was an end to their age, and there will be an end to our own age as well. This belief has always been held by the mainstream Church throughout the ages.

The interesting thing about having this understanding is that the end of the OT age becomes the focus of the NT, and not the end of the planet. It’s about the “time of the end,” not the “end of time.” All the Bible was written and put together in some form before 70 AD, and so we must keep in mind when the writers are speaking of the “last days” and the “last hour” as in 1 John 2:18, they are referencing literally the fact that the end of Israel’s time of reigning was coming quickly to an end, and that the promised kingdom would soon be manifest, as the writer of Hebrews states: “The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing” (9:8 NIV). In verse 10, he states “They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings – external regulations applying until the time of the new order.” Thus Isaiah’s words of a “new heaven” and a “new earth,” understood in their proper covenantal understanding, are referring primarily to this “new order”, the New Covenant, the New kingdom.

THE SIGN OF THE PROPHET JONAH

Jesus had told the men of that wicked generation to which he was speaking that no sign would be given them, except for the sign of the prophet Jonah. “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt.12:40 NIV). The same way that Jonah had been in the “whale’s” belly, Christ would be in the tomb. The pattern of this story is found throughout the OT, besides the most clear example that we find in the story of Jonah. Thus the “type” was fulfilled, of course, in Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection. However, the pattern continues through the NT in terms of spiritual application.

In John’s gospel, Jesus had referred to Himself as being the “true” temple. He said that if they “tore down this temple” that in three days, He would rebuild it, and He was speaking of His body. Thus, Christ is signifying something about the “true” temple of the kingdom in His own person. When we look at Jesus, He was completely man and completely God. His body was just as human as mine and yours. When he was crucified, the physical, mortal body of Jesus was laid in the tomb, and was replaced by a new “spiritual”, meaning “glorified” body. It was the same, but different. The “mortal” had put on the “immortal.” What does that show us about the nature of the “true” temple of the kingdom? That the old physical temple would have to be destroyed, and that it would be replaced forever by a new spiritual, glorified and immortal temple. This temple, according to Paul, is the Church.

TWO ASPECTS OF THE KINGDOM: Stage 1 – The Earnest

The way the kingdom of God is spoken of in Scripture, there are two aspects to it. The first is personal, and has to do with our salvation (the kingdom in us). The other is corporate, and has to do with the Church putting all of Christ’s enemies under His feet (us in the kingdom). Thus, in a personal application, Paul mentions the working of the kingdom in the same manner that Jesus did when He gave the parable of the leaven, in 1 Th. 5:23-24, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.”

There is no doubt that the saints “possessed the kingdom” at the same time that Christ did upon His resurrection, at least in the personal aspect. One could not even say that they were regenerate without the presence of Christ ruling and reigning in their hearts. However, there is a problem. Paul is speaking several years before the “new order” is brought in. Thus, the temple is still standing, and consequently, Christ has not yet “taken the kingdom of God” away from natural Israel. So then the Church, although having the personal aspect of the kingdom as individual believers, did not yet possess the authority as a corporate body to reign in the earth, since it was still in the possession of Israel. They were waiting on the “children of the kingdom” to be “cast out”. They could not claim to be stewards over the same kingdom at the same time. This personal application, that the kingdom was within them, and that they were saved, and that Christ was indeed ruling and reigning in their hearts through His Spirit, is what Paul refers to as being the

“earnest” or the “down-payment” of the inheritance. This is the first stage of the kingdom.

Stage 2 – The Complete Earnest

With this in mind, Paul is looking forward to something that the Church as a corporate body does not yet have. This is a period of waiting. Thus in this regard, Paul is looking forward to the next stage, which is the complete earnest. The complete earnest of the inheritance, would be when the Church would possess both the personal kingdom of God within them as individuals, and the right to rule as the corporate kingdom of God in the earth. This could not happen until the kingdom was taken away from apostate Israel, and the physical temple destroyed (see Rev. 12:7) The “sign” of the Son of man in heaven, the one He would give, that would show to all that He had indeed come into His kingdom as promised, was the destruction of the temple. When they saw this take place, then the saints would know that they had received the full and complete deposit. However, it is still just the deposit. In this way, the redemption spoken of by Paul lines up with the one in Luke 21, where Christ says to them, “And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads, for your redemption [vindication, riddance, deliverance] draweth nigh” (Vs. 28 KJV). Using OT language out of the Psalms, He is saying that they would be forever delivered from the slaughter of the Jews against them, and the bondage to the OT system.

Stage 3 – The Fullness of the Complete Earnest

Later on in Ephesians chapter 3, Paul describes how that the Church, as the body of Christ, has God’s own power at work within them. As the kingdom would “leaven the whole lump,” Paul says that this is true not only as an individual Christian, but as the Church as well. In verse 19, he says “..that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” Paul says that as we grow in love, we grow in all the fullness of God. What does the Bible say about Christ? That the fullness of God dwelt in Him bodily. So Paul is just saying the same exact thing here about Christ’s spiritual body, the Church.

Then, in chapter 4, he says again that the Church is growing up into the head, and that the end of it is that we reach the unity of the faith, which won’t be discussed in this article, and “in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Again, he says the goal of the Church is to attain to all the fullness of Christ. Then in verse 15, Paul says again that “we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.” Three times Paul states his belief that the Church will walk in “all the fullness of Christ.”

This idea of Paul is related to a couple of other ideas put forth by Christ. The first is the idea that the kingdom will grow and fill the whole earth. While many in the Church deny this doctrine, the principle of it is found in virtually every book of the Bible (see Mathison – Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope). The primary argument against this idea, that the Gospel of Christ will actually be successful in converting the world for

Christ, is the condition of our present society. Thus, we start interpreting the Bible based on what we see, rather than what the Bible says of itself.

This belief even the most orthodox scholars, being Cessationists even, will defend to the death. That is, the idea of the victorious Gospel and kingdom of Christ. The response to this argument is of course that, just because we don't "see" it doesn't mean that it won't ever happen. Then we see that the Gospel age is not a doomsday countdown, but rather a long period of time, for the Bible says that "he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Cor. 15:25), not "after" He has put all His enemies under His feet. It's plain that God is using the Church to accomplish this purpose (Rom. 16:20).

The interesting thing is that the same exact argument applies to EVERYTHING that Jesus said. All that He said WILL come to pass, no matter what we "see." So then, it must also apply to this Scripture as well: "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12 NIV), and "These signs shall follow them that believe..." (Mark 16). Just because we don't see these things taking place to the degree that they are seen in the Bible doesn't mean that they won't eventually be true for the Church. Of course, the whole argument is outside of the scope of this article, but it makes the point clear. Paul fully expected a time when the Church would grow from being a baby, to being a fully grown man. This coincides with the idea of the kingdom becoming a fully grown tree. Paul describes the fully grown "man" of the Church, to be an exact representation of Christ in His earthly ministry, being full of all the fullness of God.

Thus as the kingdom grows, and as the Church grows, the fullness of Christ, including His miraculous power grows as well. In fact, this idea, that the power of God exercised through the church is increasing over time supports the idea of the possibility that the Gospel of Christ will be more and more successful as time goes on, giving credence to the Victorious Gospel belief that has been held by so many throughout the centuries. This stage of the fullness of God, experienced by the Church at some point in the future is then the third stage, the fullness of the complete earnest.

Stage four – The Complete Fullness

Despite the excitement over what the early Church experienced, and what we see in some respect today, the best is indeed yet to come. The thought that Christ was slaughtered just so that we could continually "co-exist" with this evil world, and all its woes is irreprehensible. Although there will come a time in which the "whole lump is leavened", and the "knowledge of the Lord covers the earth, like the waters cover the sea," that doesn't mean that sin and death will be vanquished. There will always be some unbelievers, even if they are at some point the minority. To believe otherwise is to embrace Universalism, and while Universalism is very old, it has never been held to be true by the orthodox church at any point in history, and clearly defies the plain meaning of the Bible's teaching concerning everlasting conscious punishment, whether that includes a "literal" hell or not.

Not only that, we find from the earliest written documents of the Church, the fast held belief that Jesus Christ will visibly and physically come in the future, that there will be a bodily resurrection from the dead, and that there will be a final judgment. As Mathison implies, even though we find elements of these things being true spiritually for us now, there is still the awaiting of the hope of all that Christ died to obtain. To put it simply, the Church has believed in these things and has expressed clearly that belief for over 2000 years. To say that they were all “wrong”, and that somehow we’re all “right”, is foolishness at its highest. All future fulfillment is based on a present reality. So there is an “Already/Not Yet” tension to the kingdom.

The “Already/Not Yet” tension on the one hand for Paul was in the early Church’s waiting to receive the completeness of the earnest. For us, the “Already/Not Yet” tension is our waiting upon the consummation of the kingdom through the physical return of Christ, to receive the complete fullness of the kingdom.

This complete fullness of the kingdom means receiving ALL that Christ died to obtain. It means to be completely and finally delivered from all the effects of the fall of Adam. In other words, Christ did not die so that we could just overcome sin. He died to abolish sin forever from reality. Jesus did not die just so that I could be healed. He died so that I could have a new body likened unto the Son of God, and that there would be no more sickness. Christ did not die just so that we could see folk raised from the dead. He died so that eventually, the last enemy to be forever vanquished is death itself. Put simply, “the best is yet to come.”

So then, I see the kingdom of God as fully manifesting through these four stages of eschatological development.