

STUDY 2

The Eschatological Kingdom (God Is Always on Mission)

Brian Arthur

INTRODUCTION

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved (Eph. 1:1–6).¹

For Paul, God's eternal mission only became clear in the presence and through the revelation of Jesus Christ. This was a staggering change of mind for Paul. He was convinced that the true mission of God was to destroy the work of Jesus of Nazareth. The confronting revelation was that this man Jesus of Nazareth was Lord, God's Son, Messiah and therefore the one who represented the fulfilment of all God had ever planned and promised. Seeing the Son, Paul saw the Father and all He purposed under His rule. What had been a mystery was clear in Jesus. Not only had God always been working, but also the appearing of His Son before him in flesh and blood had been planned before the creation. Suddenly Paul's eschatology was extended to see Jesus as the Creator/Liberator/Consummator of all things. No doubt it was this revelation that engaged Paul in the deep hope of Gospel grace and marked his teaching about the eschatology with the same imprint as our Lord's. The plan of God for the end was no simple carrot dangling ahead of him as an enthusiastic operator. It was the message by which everything in the universe from beginning to end made sense. The wisdom of the Father's activity in Christ (things displayed as they truly are) had given Paul the insight (understanding leading to true action) to go to the nations:

In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him (Eph. 1:8–9).

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this study are from the New American Standard Bible.

The Eschatological Kingdom

STARTING POINTS AND THE VIEW OF GOD'S GOAL

Where we start in our understanding of God and His mission will determine and qualify our finishing point, and therefore colour all that we think and do in the present. If the existential issue of our eschatology is entrusting ourselves to the faithful Creator,² then the practical impact of eschatology, its beginning point and end, is really significant in the life of the church.

Any true comprehension of where the creation is going and why it is going there must commence with the Father who is always on mission. Our eschatology must take us to the same goal as the eschatology of Jesus. No doubt, as Adrio König says, our 'Eschatology is teleological Christology'.³ However, our Lord's goal, which was the goal of Father and Spirit, was that all things be brought together by Christ so that the Father may be 'all in all' (1 Cor. 15:28). In Ephesians 1, Paul saw that the wisdom of God's mission all began with the Father, and ends in the praise of His glorious grace (1:6). If our comprehension of God's mission and *telos* starts at any other point than the Father, before the creation of the world, then we may be working to a goal that is different to God's. DeVern F. Fromke made the following points about:

... the present spiritual climate which supports a great deal of religious activity but little spiritual growth.

... because we usually start from the wrong point, we develop a *false point of reference* ... because we take the part as though it were the whole, we develop a *fatal near-sightedness* ... because we start wrong, our procedures become wrong, and therefore our progress is off-course. We have *no proper point of co-ordination*.⁴

To adapt Fromke's words, this study is about establishing a true point of reference from which we come alive to the Father's intentions and discover that His continual rule, activity and purpose is our true point of coordination and that His goal is directly connected to His Fatherhood.⁵ Where our emphasis remains at the point of being recipients of grace rather than participants in God Himself, then our *telos* will be truncated to the present or at best our lifetime. Grace falsely understood can reduce eschatology to essentially a marooned concept not rooted in the nature of the Father, His creation or His goal. In the face of present evil, this turns hope into a short-term, fragile thing as our whole expectation is shrunken into what we can see by sight. Love becomes a means to an end, a closed personal circuit with no view to loving the Giver or His children, instead of participation with the Father.

Paul's great cry in Ephesians 1 is a great evocative passage of the New Testament, a great doxology of grace that echoes right back to pre-time. However, it is grace that actually transports us to participation forever, not merely for a more blessed life now. Verse 4 is clear. God's mission has always been to set us before Him, holy and blameless in love. This transporting of us to be with Him must be what Paul refers to as bringing the praise of the glory of His grace (v. 6). A static grace that simply

² Geoffrey Bingham notes in his book, *The Clash of the Kingdoms* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1989, p. 88) that the action of God in creation and redemption is one action which, '... dispels the thought which comes to man that God may not succeed in His creation, and in this sense not prove "faithful"' (cf. 1 Pet. 4:19).

³ Adrio König, *The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology: Towards a Christ-Centered Approach*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2003, p. 38.

⁴ DeVern F. Fromke, *The Ultimate Intention*, Sure Foundation, Cloverdale, 1974, pp. 8, 24.

⁵ D. F. Fromke, p. 25.

The Eschatological Kingdom

puddles around in our present sin, bringing a sense of ease that bears no fruit of communion, is not the grace of Christ. However rich the elements are that constitute our present salvation they do not encapsulate the whole *telos* of God:

Wide as these elements cover the matter of salvation—particularly as to the benefits of salvation—it is necessary that we discover and understand even more than these benefits. We need to see why we were created, and what God has in store for us and all His creation. This means that in mission God has more for us than even these benefits. Whilst we are *recipients* of the grace and love of God in what is set out above, we need to know more about what it means to be *participants in God Himself*, in God who is love. The nature of love is that recipients of love cannot simply receive and take but must necessarily love the One who has loved them and all who are upon the earth. Rightly understood, this process of receiving love and loving—along with its other moral concomitants—can be called *theosis* or the *divinisation* of us in the action of God. This means, simply, that we are filled unto all the fullness of God in all our parts, personally, and in all our community, corporately. It does not mean that Man moves from being human to becoming divine, but that he, being human, fills to the full what it is to be the image of God and participates in the action of all that God is doing here, in time, and there, in eternity. All of it is really the exposition of God who is love, and so of Man who, as the image of God, must needs be a participant in that love so that the ultimate community of Man will be seen to be as he lives as the community of love. The Community of God—the Trinity—and the community of Man (the ecclesia), can never be apart in eternity. They must be one—whatever that may mean in practice. Paul is talking about this eschatologically as well as presently in 1 Corinthians 12:31–13:13. Paul is saying that history will be completed by love; that love is ‘the highest way of all’. It is the true *telos* of history.⁶

To return to Fromke’s point, if we see God’s main mission beginning at the fall, then we will be preoccupied with personal salvation and getting to heaven. It begins with the need of man and ends with what we ultimately get. If we see the start at the creation of Adam then often we end with a ‘kingdom’ goal in which man sees himself as king upon the earth. Others, Fromke says, start with God as Creator, and beginning in Genesis attempt to find reason and meaning within the creation. Fromke argues that these three starting points are deficient. The true place to start is the Father and His paternal heart:

It was not man’s Fall that determined all things; it was not God’s desire for a kingdom, nor even His plan for a new creation—but it was God’s paternal being and nature which determined His primary desire, His eternal purpose, His supreme dedication and finally the ultimate realization which will bring to Him that satisfaction of which His Father-heart is so worthy.⁷

So we say that the Father, called the Living God, has always been on mission, to rule over all ‘sendings’ (His law, the prophets, Israel, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the church and all His servants in the angelic realm) with a view to His *telos*. This not only ties the end to the beginning but also to every other action in history as well.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Scripture reveals that God has always worked from a beginning linked to and structured to reach the end that He intends. Moltman said it this way, ‘. . . the inner ground

⁶ G. C. Bingham, NCTM Monthly Ministry Study, 1st March 2003, ‘God & Church on Mission’, p. 4.

⁷ D. F. Fromke, pp. 172–4.

The Eschatological Kingdom

of creation is to be found in glory . . .⁸ I take it that Moltmann means that ontologically creation will only be fully seen for what it is in the *telos*. The new creation will be new inasmuch as it will then reflect the full glory of the Father who made it, the Son who freed it and the Spirit who opens and applies its glory to the hearts of God's children. In Moltmann's terms the Father is always on mission:

God keeps the world's true future open for it through the gift of time, which works against all the world's tendencies to close in on itself, to shut itself off. This must be understood as *the divine patience*. God has patience with his world because he has hope for it.⁹

So to crimp one's view of the glory to come is to deflect the glory of God from the beginning and the present.

If the end of the Father's mission is organically connected to Him and His plan from before the creation of the world then we would expect to see linkages, common themes and features appearing at the beginning that come through clearly in the consummation. If as we have suggested the Father's eternal mission is communal, with Himself in the Triune Family, then we would expect to see that His actions and interventions in realising the plan have that emphasis. In other words we would expect to find a consistency not only between the beginning and the end but also the in-between as well. If this last point is so then the life of every generation of the Father's family would be marked by a powerful eschatology. Equally, we would need to ask if our eschatology is that which we find in the heart of the Father, His Christ and His Apostles.

Geoffrey Bingham, in *Love's Most Glorious Covenant* (Redeemer Baptist Press, Castle Hill, 1997), shows that the three elements worked out by man in the covenant of grace, vocation, Sabbath rest of God and marriage not only were directly related to the creation but also everyday freedom and joy of humanity, and indeed are the elements that appear as significant in the *telos*. He has suggested a fourth element since that book was published, the rule of man as God's regent over creation.¹⁰ These four elements of the covenant are not given to man by God as contractual elements to be worked out in order for God to validate His covenant. They are all dynamic gifts of God, blessings in which His presence in grace transports the hearts of the recipients into communion with Him and promises that, despite the presence of sin and evil, what they are tasting will ultimately be their full fare.

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

The view backwards from Revelation reveals that there are indeed elements that appear in Glory that seem to have been hinted at even within the garden. They show us not merely a pattern in the whole cosmos, but the presence of the Creator/Father on mission. The Tree of Life reappears again in the promise Jesus gave to the Ephesian Church. This Tree John saw in his vision of the city of God had prime place and dynamic ministry within that city (Rev. 22:2). The Tree of Life becomes a sign of

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, SCM Press Ltd, London, 2005, p. 209.

⁹ J. Moltmann, p. 209.

¹⁰ See a helpful summary of this argument in *God and Man in the Mission of the Kingdom*, Geoffrey Bingham, Redeemer Baptist Press, North Parramatta, 2003, pp. 226–7.

The Eschatological Kingdom

God's presence and promise for His covenant children through Israel's history, as Beale suggests.¹¹ As the Tree is seen to heal the nations the Cross comes into view as the ultimate expression of the Father's mission to restore the creation.¹² The garden motif is clear in the final vision of the city of God with its river of life (Rev. 22:1; cf. Gen. 2:10). Many of the garden motifs are also to be seen in Israel's Temple, indicating that the glory of Eden is to be expressed in the glory of the eventual *telos*. It seems these similarities are more than cultural extensions. They seem to indicate that the mission of God to His creation as expressed in the garden fellowship is continued in ministry to Israel, and in particular brought to fullness in Christ.

However, it is in the coming of Christ that the beginning and the end of God's mission is fully revealed. In Christ, the Father's continual working towards His goal is revealed. He is described as the one who sums up and unites all things in the fullness of God's consummation time:

He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth (Eph. 1:9–10).

But Christ was also the 'beginner' of all things in the creation (John 1:1), and he it is who pre-dated all things and who holds all things together (Col. 1:17), and all that was created was created for him (Col. 1:16). So the whole of the eschatological rule of God finds its beginning and end in Jesus Christ. He is the first and the last (Rev. 1:17). All these also apply to the Father in other passages. What we have then in Jesus is identical and unified with the work of the Father.

GOD'S ESCHATOLOGICAL MISSION IN JESUS

When the Son comes preaching the kingdom and the liberation of creation, his chief presupposition, according to Ridderbos, is the eschatological nature of the kingdom. 'The whole of his *kerygma*, and the references to it are like a golden thread interwoven with the whole texture of the Gospel.'¹³ Jesus didn't simply prophesy about an *eschaton*, but everything he did was an expression of the Father's glorious goal. So his ministry was a sign, and a collection of signs, revealing the true nature of life in the Father's kingdom, as planned from the beginning. They became windows through which the glory of his Father's future goal for His people was visible. So at the wedding in Cana, Israel's spiritual dereliction was contrasted with the abundant provision of the Father's King.

So everything Jesus did was eschatological.¹⁴ Not just that it pointed to a glorious end, but in his presence it had arrived. 'If Jesus Christ is the last, then the end has already been reached in him; the end is even now being reached by him; and the end

¹¹ G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2004, p. 71.

¹² G. C. Bingham, *The Revelation of St John the Divine: Commentary and Essays on the Book of the Revelation*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1993, p. 205.

¹³ Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Philadelphia, 1962, p. 37.

¹⁴ 'It must be affirmed that because Christ is creation's goal, creation obviously reaches its goal when he comes—*every time* he comes!' A. König, p. 42.

The Eschatological Kingdom

will yet be reached through him.’¹⁵ So our attention in seeing the mission of God must always be directed to Jesus, not to the so-called ‘last things’. König identifies three ‘comings’ of Jesus: Jesus for us, in us and with us.¹⁶ The first, his coming for us through the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, achieved the *eschaton* (God’s purpose), not just the potential for the *telos* to be reached. The second, Jesus in us, applying the objective works of God he achieved for us through the indwelling Spirit. Thirdly, Jesus with us consummating the work of God through the ages by taking us with him into the new creation.

UTILITARIANISM OR ESCHATOLOGICAL HOPE

So with the ends of the ages come upon us we live in a marvellous time of the Father’s mission. Two dangers become apparent for those living in this final age. One is that we seek to live as if the culmination of all things has already come, leading to triumphalism followed often by pride in achievement and then growing disenchantment at the presence of indwelling sin and the obvious presence of evil remaining in the world. The second, similar in some ways, is an attempt to establish the kingdom in our churches by getting our hands upon the most recent theological methodology (human energies and strategies) that promises to deliver the kingdom and all its blessings now. The healthy desire for the love of God to be seen may, if the mystery of holiness and His righteous judgements is diminished, move into a ‘gospel’, ‘imposing upon God the necessity for Him to move in love, compassion and pity’.¹⁷ Instead of hoping in the Father who is always working (the mind of Christ in John 5:17), we look to establish ministries that will with observable signs sweep people into the church. Instead of living in the spirit of Romans 7 we demand that if God is to be believed He must only deal with us all as in Romans 8. Instead of looking to Jesus for immortality secured in his resurrection and delivered in kind when he takes us through the grave, we may attempt to secure an enduring name through the way we minister the churches, or through the ability to turn ministry into an impressive self-perpetuating profession.

When asked if and when the kingdom would ‘appear’, Jesus’ reply seemed designed to put paid to having some kind of observable dominion to which one could point and say, ‘This is the kingdom’:

He answered them and said, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or, “There it is!” For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst’ (Luke 17:20–21).

The question of the Pharisees implied that whatever Jesus was on about they could see nothing of the kingdom about it. Theirs was an eschatology of signs, birthed out of a total ignorance of the Father:

And the Father who sent Me, He has borne witness of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form (John 5:37).

¹⁵ A. König, p. 43.

¹⁶ A. König, pp. 44–6.

¹⁷ G. C. Bingham, *The Clash of the Kingdoms*, p. 84.

The Eschatological Kingdom

Failure to see things from the Father's perspective meant that Jesus appeared nothing like their image of a king, let alone God's King. The Lord's point was that the kingdom does not come with spectacle and structural brilliance as the world would expect. It was not something about which the world could say, 'Lo here it is!' Its germination at the hand of the Father's King was of a different order. It was not a religious thing lending itself to bigger and better professional management:

We tell ourselves then that the weapons of our warfare are spiritual, even if they look pathetic in the eyes of self-magnifying human beings and fallen angelic powers. Ambition of an egotistical kind has dropped away from us in the humility of our loving, reigning Monarch. We do not see the goal as ideology, even the highest ideology.¹⁸

The kingdom, with a foretaste of what was to come, was present in the King and seen by those to whom the King brought liberty from the enemies such as death, Satan, sickness and sin. Jesus did not mean that the kingdom was invisible in this present *eschaton*, but rather that it was not going to fit into their religious images. He was persistently doing signs and wonders in their presence, but they were not being read. At the Cana wedding, some saw the glory of the King and thus the kingdom glory breaking into their now, whilst it appears others did not. All they saw was buckets full of wine.

The pressure towards utilitarianism in the church is strong and often very subtle. Pastors enter the fray with high hopes, for the church and themselves. The deep lust for painless fulfilment at the hands of the local church is a serpent ready to strike. The church, too, often has its own idol of being swept up in programmes and power that makes faith automatic and life in this age simply sweet. Ministry becomes adapted towards these goals as does training for ministry. Visible progress of the 'Lo, here' and 'Lo, there' kind is sought and kingdom knowledge and wisdom is reduced to a marketable package presented to the church or demanded by the church. So a steady progression away from the dynamic word of the kingdom takes place into manageable goals, interpersonal competence and the professional ability to manage the 'kingdom'.¹⁹ All of this has the initial sense of being dynamic and relevant, but in the light of the presence of the King and his *telos* it is static and pitiful.

CHRISTIAN TALIBANISM AND THE LOSS OF GOD'S GOAL

With the rise of fundamentalism inside and outside of the church, ministry methods have changed. Strict legalistic adherence to the Scriptures, as if by that life can be produced, can lead to the kingdom being ethicised and politicised. Formation of Christian political parties and lobby groups is seen by some as the way to implement Christian standards in the community, securing the kingdom for God. Not so far behind this approach there hovers a dissatisfaction with the simple preaching of Christ crucified. Are we in danger of exactly the thing for which Jesus rebuked the Pharisees?

¹⁸ G. C. Bingham, *God and Man in the Mission of the Kingdom*, p. 126.

¹⁹ 'Office disappears in profession, believing in doing, thought in "personality". And so, once again the wheel has come full circle. The image of the pastor that dominated Protestant Liberalism has returned to dominate Protestant evangelicalism.' David F. Wells, *No Place For Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1993, p. 237.

The Eschatological Kingdom

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life (John 5:39–40).

We are not called to form a Christian state but to direct people to the King. The unspectacular notion of love laying down its life becomes an absurdity where political options are embraced. New ‘swords’ other than the one from the mouth of Christ are sought, used and discarded regularly. Because of his eschatological vision Jesus was clear about the place of the sword in his ministry (Matt. 26:52; John 18:36; cf. Rev. 1:16).

When we come to him and receive life what are we doing? We are acknowledging that his action in this last age is the ‘end’ of the Father’s great covenant plan that He will have a people holy and blameless before Him for His intimate possession and their ultimate joy. All that will be to His ultimate glory. Only the Son has delivered us to that goal. We may not take our eyes from him, even if it is to the Scriptures, for in his own words, ‘ . . . it is these that testify of Me’ (John 5:39).

As König reminds us:

If Jesus Christ is the last, then the end has already been reached in him; the end is even now being reached by Him; and the end will yet be reached through him.²⁰

²⁰ A. König, p. 43.