

# Dispensationalism and the Kingdom

by

Kristofer J. Carlson

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## Introduction

Matthew sums up the message of John the Baptist in this way: “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2); likewise, the message of Jesus is summed up in the same manner: “Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17). David Scaer notes the manyfold Christological themes developed by Matthew up to this point in the narrative: “Jesus the Revealer (Moses), the Redeemer of Israel, the Christ (the Son of David, and the God of Israel (Emmanuel)).”<sup>1</sup> The introduction of the kingdom of heaven as the theme of Jesus ministry is the culmination of Matthew’s Christological overview. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is to be understood in Christological terms, and a misunderstanding of the kingdom has serious Christological implications.

Matthew includes a sermon preached by John the Baptist against the Pharisees and Sadducees, in which he demanded of them: “Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance” (Matt 3:8). The clear implication is that the kingdom of heaven both requires and brings about a change of heart, a change of mind, and a change of life. The coming of the kingdom of heaven calls for repentance, and the repentant life is known by its fruits (Matt 7:20). The messianic expectations of the Jewish people were for a political savior. Jesus tells the Jewish leaders that the kingdom of heaven comes not with outward show; to those who demand an earthly, political kingdom the message of Jesus is: “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20-21).

The dispensationalist misunderstands the nature of the kingdom, and therefore misinterprets the central message of Jesus. The dispensationalist looks for an earthly kingdom of power and glory as the culmination of the promises made to the Jewish nation in the Old Testament, which Jesus message was quite different. Scaer points out that for Matthew, the kingdom of heaven was connected with his understanding that Jesus was king; and the ultimate expression of His kingship was in dying on the cross for His people.<sup>2</sup> The ultimate manifestation of the kingdom is “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev 13:8). Jesus is the suffering servant, and the suffering servant is Himself the kingdom. Jesus is the kingdom of heaven in a person; the person and work of Christ—his dying on the cross for the sins of the world—is the reason why He (and we as believers) are poor in spirit, and why ours is the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:3).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Scaer, D. *The Sermon on the Mount: The Church’s First Statement of the Gospel*. (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2000). p. 75

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 82

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 82

The kingdom Jesus offered is made manifest through the shedding of His own blood for the forgiveness of sins (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20). Joseph Ratzinger writes of “[Jesus’] promise of God’s Kingdom to the poor, in the many meanings of that term, and his linking of the gift of the Kingdom, in indissoluble manner, with repentance.”<sup>4</sup> But the dispensationalist does not have a cruciform theology, and does not see that Jesus death is both sign and seal of the kingdom. For the dispensationalist, Jesus clear teaching on the nature of the kingdom is distorted such that the dispensationalist speaks of not one, but three kingdoms. With different kingdoms in view, the dispensationalist must postulate different gospels.

In dispensationalist theology, the message of Jesus is divided such that the Gospel itself is in jeopardy. C. I. Scofield suggests four “forms” of the gospel: one Gospel of the (millennial) kingdom; another Gospel of the grace of God (justification); another called the everlasting Gospel, which is preached at the end of the tribulation prior to the judgment of the nations; and finally what Paul calls “my Gospel,” which Scofield defines as “the revelation of the grace of God in its fullest development.”<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Scofield immediately follows this discussion of the four forms of the Gospel with a discussion of what Paul called “another Gospel, which is not another” (Gal 1:6-7). Scofield does not see what should be blindingly obvious—that by dividing the Gospel of our Lord, Scofield is himself proclaiming “another Gospel, which is not another.”

The dispensationalist sees scripture as using coded language in which synonymous terms have very different meanings. The task of the exegete is then to break the code and discern these hidden meanings. The dispensationalist claims to adhere to a strict “literal, or grammatical-historical method”<sup>6</sup> of interpretation. In fact, the dispensationalist’s approach to scripture has more in common with the Gnostic mysteries—or at least the Augustinian four-fold method of interpretation, in which the task of the exegete is to ferret out the truths of scripture using four separate modes of interpretation: the historical, the analytical, the analogical, and the allegorical.<sup>7</sup> The different meanings of synonymous terms are determined not through the text itself, but in reference to a pre-existing interpretational schema. Only in this manner—by departing from the literal, or grammatical-historical method of interpreting scripture—is the dispensationalist able to discern multiple kingdoms and multiple gospels.

## The Dispensational Schema

Dispensationalism is an interpretive schema for understanding the bible. The apocalyptic passages of scripture are the lens through which the rest of scripture is interpreted; the rest of

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<sup>4</sup> Ratzinger, J. *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*. (Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1988). p. 28-29

<sup>5</sup> Scofield, C. I. *Scofield Reference Bible*. (New York, Oxford University Press, Scofield Facsimile Series no. 2, 1945). p. 1342, note on Rev 14:6

<sup>6</sup> Pentecost, J. D. *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*. (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1958) p. 9ff.

<sup>7</sup> Chemnitz, M. tr. Kramer, F. *Examination of the Council of Trent: Part I*. (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1971). p. 211.

scripture is placed in the service of the apocalyptic.<sup>8</sup> An evidence for this is the requirement of the dispensationalist schema for three kingdoms: the earthly kingdom, the spiritual kingdom, and the mystery form of the kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

The earthly kingdom was what Jesus offered the Jews of his day, but his offer was rejected. The Jews were set aside for a time, whereupon the church, the gentile bride of Christ, became the mystery form of the kingdom. After the removal of the church comes the time of Jacob's trouble, or the tribulation; and following the tribulation Christ returns in glory to establish His promised millennial reign upon the throne of David. Both the earthly kingdom and the mystery form of the kingdom are part of the spiritual kingdom. Within the interpretive schema, these three kingdoms make sense. However, these three kingdoms cannot be independently supported from scripture; instead, they have been artificially imposed upon scripture in the service of the dispensationalist schema.

Moreover, the description of multiple kingdoms creates for them a logical trap, in that they restrict Christ in his humanity to one physical locale, while requiring Christ to reign upon two thrones at the same time (present at the right hand of the Father, yet ruling from the throne of David.) Also, it is difficult to reconcile the self-revelation of the Christ with dispensationalist dogma. One has to dismiss or explain away too much. Ultimately, dispensationalism fails to cohere with Jesus' own teaching on the kingdom and his own self-revelation as king. Thus the dispensationalist will be shown to have a faulty Christology, which is a most grievous error.

## **Jesus Teaching on the Kingdom**

In the gospel of John, Pilate asks Jesus, "Art thou the King of the Jews?" Jesus answers him by saying, "My kingdom is not of this world." (John 18:33b, 36a) And that should settle that. Jesus is asked a plain, clear question and provides a plain, clear answer. His answer affords only one literal interpretation: the kingdom Jesus promises is a spiritual kingdom, not an earthly one.

The Pharisees came to Jesus and asked when the kingdom of God should come; Jesus answered, "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for behold, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20-21). This is seen also in the book of the Revelation, where we hear "great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev 11:15). One body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all (Eph 4:4a,5). Oh, and also one kingdom.

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<sup>8</sup> The late Gerhard Forde defined the Apocalyptic as: "The story of the beginning, the catastrophic misadventure, and coming cataclysmic end of the present age. Salvation is largely a future possibility given from out of the ashes of the fire from which those who are righteous must wait---no doubt with a certain anxiety. Its poser and theological utility and truth is in the impending 'No!', the swift, sudden, and sure judgment against a creation that has turned against its Lord, the insistence that this cannot go on forever." Gerhard Forde, *The Apocalyptic No and the Eschatological Yes: Reflections, Suspicions, Fears, and Hopes*. In Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Eds.), *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenecism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004) 21.

<sup>9</sup> Pentecost, *op cit*, p. 142-143.

The passage in Luke 17 is especially interesting. The text begins in vs. 20 & 21 with the Pharisees demand to know “when the kingdom of God should come”; whereupon Jesus answers them, saying the Kingdom is not a matter of external observation or physical location, but rather “the kingdom of God is within you.” Joseph Ratzinger makes the following observation regarding this text:

*This statement is so hard to translate that every translation must be an interpretation. Precisely in this, it reflects the ‘chiaroscuro’ of Jesus’ whole message about the Kingdom. In its entirety that message shrinks from mere spectating, “observation.” Its “translations” are always interpretations. The term “observation,” used in this text, was commonly employed in the medical practice of the ancient world for the observation of symptoms. It also turns up in the context of predicting the future through observations, something assiduously cultivated in astrology and the pagan cultus. The mystery of the Kingdom does not disclose itself to this kind of observation. Its coming calls out for another kind of seeing.<sup>10</sup>*

Ratzinger then writes of the Christological interpretation of this passage in this manner:

*We could call it christological if we include the doctrine of the Holy Spirit within Christology. Jesus is speaking in the present tense: the Kingdom of God cannot be observed, yet, unobserved, it is among those to whom he is speaking. It stands among them—in his own person.*

*In him the future is present, God’s Kingdom at hand, but in such a way that a mere observer, concerned with recording symptoms or plotting the movements of the stars, might well overlook the fact. In a splendid coinage of Origen’s, Jesus is ‘hē autobasileia’, “The Kingdom in person.”<sup>11</sup>*

Ratzinger draws a direct correlation between Jesus’ statement that “the kingdom of God is within you” and Jesus statement in both Luke and Matthew that “I with the finger of God [Spirit of God] cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you” (Luke 11:20; Matt 12:28).

*Let us remember that God’s Kingdom is an event, not a sphere. Jesus’ actions, words, sufferings break the power of that alienation which lies so heavily on human life. In liberating people, they establish God’s Kingdom. Jesus is that Kingdom since through him the Spirit of God acts in the world.*

*Here we glimpse the inner unity of the pre-Easter and post-Easter ‘kerygma’. The motif of the Kingdom is transformed into Christology, because it is from Christ that the Spirit, the reign of God, comes.<sup>12</sup>*

Their king was among them, but it was not Himself he was referring to, but His kingdom. The kingdom is within you (plural); Jesus was speaking to them not as individuals, but as a group.

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<sup>10</sup> Ratzinger, *op cit*, p. 32-33

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p. 34

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p. 35

The kingdom of God did not manifest itself outwardly, but inwardly. The Pharisees saw a man, not a God; a carpenter, not a king; they demanded a political kingdom that would position them as rulers, while the Christ came to serve, not to be served.

The kingdom of God was within them, yet not for them. Upon hearing the proclamation of John the Baptist that the kingdom of God was at hand, the Pharisees had not repented (Mk 1:4). Upon hearing Jesus own announcement that the times had been fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand, the Pharisees still refused to repent and steadfastly refused to believe the good news (Mk 1:5). The Pharisees did not have a place in the kingdom of God.

It is interesting to note that the first and central message of Jesus, recorded in both Matthew and Mark, is that the times had been fulfilled, that the kingdom of God is at hand, and that people were to repent and believe the good news (Mt 4:17; Mk 1:5). While Matthew and Mark provide a thematic summation of Jesus message, the first message of Jesus as recorded by Luke is an extended account of his teaching. Jesus was in the Nazareth on the Sabbath, whereupon he opened the scroll to Isaiah 61 and began to read:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,*

*To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. (Isa 61:1,2a)*

After reading this passage, Jesus announces that this day this scripture is fulfilled in your ears (Lu 4:16-21). For what purpose did Jesus choose this passage? Jesus was announcing that the eschatological promises of this passage, which is clearly messianic, had come true for them as they heard him read it. If we grant that Jesus' first message in Luke is a parallel of Jesus' first message as recorded in Matthew and Mark, then we must say that Jesus announced the coming of the Kingdom of God in their midst. As the Messiah, the anointed one, His word alone had the power to proclaim and therefore bring about the kingdom of God.<sup>13</sup> As recorded by Luke, the message of Jesus is eschatological, but not apocalyptic; and his eschatological message is that of the good news. The central message of Jesus, as revealed through Luke's gospel, is that of healing, deliverance, sight, and liberty. If we presume the first message of Jesus as recorded by Luke to be a parallel to the first messages recorded by Matthew and Mark, the focus of the kingdom of God is the justification of the repentant sinner.

Of course it is interesting to note that Jesus only quotes from the first half of Isa 61:2, and leaves off before reading the apocalyptic passage regarding "the day of vengeance of our God" (Isa 61:2b). This is especially important for the dispensationalists, because it destroys one of their central claims: that Jesus was actually offering the millennial kingdom to the Jews, and

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<sup>13</sup> The attempt to kill Jesus at the completion of his sermon was not due to his references to Gentiles being chosen over Jews, as inflammatory as that was, but because Jesus was making messianic claims. The explicit messianic claims of this passage, and the reaction of the Synagogue, are but a precursor of the reaction of the Sanhedrin to Jesus' messianic claims at his trial (Lu 22:66-71).

that after their rejection of the kingdom comes the church---that other people of God, the gentile bride of Christ, and the mystery form of the kingdom. If Jesus was actually promising the millennial kingdom, then the apocalyptic would be an essential part of His message, for the day of vengeance upon the enemies of God is an essential component of millennial hopes. But Jesus was quite conscious of what he was offering, which was not the apocalyptic end, but the eschatological in-breaking of the kingdom of God upon the earth.

## The Dispensationalist and the Three Kingdoms

J. Dwight Pentecost's classic exposition of dispensational eschatology, entitled *Things to Come*, never discusses Jesus answer to Pilate's question: "My kingdom is not of this world." However, he does quote the following from Louis Sperry Chafer's systematic theology concerning the spiritual kingdom: "The kingdom is not incorporeal or separate from that which is material, but still it is spiritual in that the will of God will be directly effective in all matters of government and conduct."<sup>14</sup> In saying this, Chafer was describing what dispensationalists call the spiritual kingdom, the kingdom "comprised of the elect of all the ages, who have experienced a new birth by the power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>15</sup> Dr. Chafer further describes this kingdom in this manner:

*There is a kingdom of God which embraces the entire universe, over which God is enthroned, and to this kingdom every enemy must finally be brought back to original subjection and adjustment, or be banished forever. This final victory is described in I Cor. 15:24, 25: "Then cometh the end, when He (Christ) shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when He shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under His feet."<sup>16</sup>*

This spiritual kingdom is differentiated from the millennial kingdom, the "literal, earthly kingdom over which Christ rules from David's throne in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant."<sup>17</sup> Both these kingdoms are distinct from the mystery form of the kingdom, which "has reference to the age between the two advents of Christ."<sup>18</sup> The mystery relates "this present age to the eternal purposes of God in regard to His kingdom."<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Chafer provides the following scriptural evidence for two kingdoms for the two peoples of God:

*Two distinct lines of seed were promised to Abraham. One, an earthly seed, to be like the dust of the earth, without number (Gen. 13:16), centered wholly in the earth by a relationship of*

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<sup>14</sup> Chafer, L.S. *Systematic Theology*.(Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947) V, pp. 334-40

<sup>15</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*. (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1958) p. 142.

<sup>16</sup> Chafer, L.S. *Satan*. Chapter II. Project Guttenberg eBook, 2004. Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12586/12586-h/12586-h.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Pentecost, *op cit*, p. 142.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p. 143.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p. 143.

*physical generation: the other seed were likened to the stars of heaven, without number (Gen. 15:5), centered wholly in the heavenlies by a relationship of Spirit regeneration, which is the present answer of God to all true Abrahamic faith (Rom. 4:1-5). The earthly people found their origin in the physical fatherhood of Abraham: while the heavenly people find theirs in the shed blood of Christ. One had an earthly history from Abraham to their dispersion among the Gentiles—a history which will yet be resumed and the everlasting covenants fulfilled in the faithfulness of God: the other has a transient earthly pilgrimage from the Cross to their completion; when they will be caught up to meet and marry their Bridegroom, and be forever with the Lord (I Thes. 4:13-17).*

*To one, Christ is the coming glorious Messiah, who will actually sit upon the throne of His father, David (Lu. 1:31-33), in a literal earthly kingdom (else all Scripture language fails): to the other, He is the glorious Head of the Body, and coming Bridegroom. One of these lines of seed are the favored subjects in the earthly kingdom: while the other is to be in His bosom as a bride, and be associated with Him in His reign (I Cor. 6:2; Rev. 3:21).<sup>20</sup>*

The scriptural evidence given by Chafer is based upon his understanding that there are two peoples of God: His chosen people, the Jews; and the Gentile bride of Christ, which is the church. To the one is promised an earthly kingdom; to the other, a heavenly one. The millennial kingdom is then a socio/economic and political kingdom upon the earth, which is a necessity if the promises of God to the Abraham's genetic descendents are to be fulfilled. The dispensationalist interpretive schema is recursive, in that the existence of two peoples of God require multiple kingdoms, and the multiple kingdoms require two peoples of God. The trouble with this type of recursion is that blocking a single feedback loop destroys the entire interpretive schema.

In answer to the claims of Dr. Chafer, it should be pointed out that when addressing the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus downplayed the importance of being merely of Abraham's physical seed: "Think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham" (Matt 3:9). The apostle Paul also downplayed the importance of being merely of Abraham's physical seed: "For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed" (Rom 9:6-8). Paul continues on with the illustration of the potter who has prepared vessels of mercy, prepared beforehand for glory. These vessels of mercy are both Jews and Gentiles. Of these vessels of mercy, God says: "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. And it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people; there shall they be called the children of the living God" (Rom 9:25-26). After describing the separation of Jew and Gentile, the apostle Paul then says Christ Jesus came "to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace... that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross" (Eph 2: 15b-16a).

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<sup>20</sup> Chafer, L.S. *op cit.* Chapter II.

The dispensationalist is tripped up by the words of Scripture. John the Baptist was clearly uninterested in mere genetic kinship, going so far as to indicate that the children of Abraham were destined for judgment.

*And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. (Matt 3:9-10).*

The centurion asked of Jesus not that he should come to his home, but that he should but speak a word and the centurion's servant would be healed. Jesus reveals a continuity with the preaching of John the Baptist, in that mere genetic kinship is despised, and that many of the "children of the kingdom" were destined for judgment.

*When Jesus heard it, he marvelled, and said to them that followed, Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matt 8:10-12).*

The sons of Abraham are clearly understood in scripture to be something other than a mere physical lineage. What both John the Baptist and Jesus say is something that would be quite shocking to the Jew, for whom lineal descent from Abraham was almost a necessity.

The dispensationalist cannot dismiss the words of Jesus by saying they were written for the Jew, not for the Gentile, because the apostle Paul is much more explicit. Our Lord Jesus Christ, by his death on the cross, broke down the middle wall of partition and made both Jew and Gentile into one flesh. The facile arguments of the dispensationalist cannot stand, for the plain, clear words of scripture contradict them. And if there are not two peoples of God, then the argument for multiple kingdoms falls to the ground.

## **The Kingdom of God vs. the Kingdom of Heaven**

The Greek word *basileia* is variously translated in the KJV as the following: kingdom (of God), kingdom (of heaven), kingdom (general or evil), (Thy or Thine) kingdom, His kingdom, the kingdom, (My) kingdom, as well as other miscellaneous uses. The word refers to the right or authority to rule over a kingdom. In the N.T. this refers to the reign of the Messiah. Jesus, as the Messiah, has the right to rule over the heavens and the earth. This kingdom is not carnal, but spiritual. If Jesus says his kingdom is not of this world, then dispensationalists do violence to the literal meaning of the text when they disregard his words in the service of an interpretive schema.

The notes in the Scofield Reference Bible,<sup>21</sup> unlike the statements made by Pentecost, make a clear distinction between the *kingdom of God* and the *kingdom of heaven*. In Matthew 3:1-2, John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness. “Repent ye,” he says, “for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Scofield’s note on this passage states that this term is peculiar to Matthew, and refers to “the Messianic earthly rule of Jesus Christ, the Son of David.”<sup>22</sup> Scofield’s notes on Matthew 6:33 state that the “kingdom of God is to be distinguished from the kingdom of heaven,” in that it has different characteristics. The kingdom of God is universal, (not millennial.) The kingdom of God is open only to the Christian. The kingdom of heaven (millennial) is the earthly sphere of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is “inward and spiritual” rather than outward and carnal. The kingdom of heaven is merged into the kingdom of God “when Christ, having ‘put all enemies under His feet,’ ‘shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father’ (I Cor. 15:24-28.)”<sup>23</sup> Regarding the greater context of the passage, Scofield’s notes on Matthew 5:2 indicate that the Sermon on the Mount contains the principles of the *kingdom of heaven*, and its literal application is to the messianic, millennial kingdom. A secondary moral application to the Christian is also inferred.<sup>24</sup>

The exegesis of Scofield breaks down when Jesus himself uses the terms kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God within the Sermon on the Mount. (Matt 5:3,10,19,20; 6:10,13,33; 7:21) Jesus uses the term *kingdom of heaven* [βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν] five times, the term *kingdom* twice, and *kingdom of God* [βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ] once. It is evident from the context that these are intended to be interchangeable. If the Sermon on the Mount is, as the dispensationalists argue, the constitution of the millennial kingdom of Christ<sup>25</sup> upon the reconstituted throne of David in Jerusalem, then why is the term *kingdom of heaven* not used consistently throughout? The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke,) contain many parallel passages where the terms “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” are exchanged.<sup>26</sup> As an example, Luke’s shorter version of the Sermon on the Mount uses the term *kingdom of God* where Matthew used the term *kingdom of heaven*. (Matt 5:3 cf Luke 6:20); Are we then to infer that Luke was mistaken? That the Holy Spirit improperly guided Luke? Rather, we must accept that both Jesus

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<sup>21</sup> “My faith is built on nothing less, than Scofield’s notes, and Scripture Press.” An amusing and self-mocking couplet which was current among fundamentalists some thirty years ago, and contains a nugget of truth. The reference notes in the Scofield Reference Bible constitute the confession of the faith for many fundamentalists. That is why it is necessary to refer to Scofield’s notes, even when they conflict with other dispensationalist theologians.

<sup>22</sup> C.I. Scofield, *Scofield Reference Bible*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917) 996

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 1003

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 999-1000

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> So that we are not accused of building a doctrine from a single text, here is a list of passages where the terms “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” are used synonymously: Matt 4:17 with Mark 1:14-15; Matt 5:3 with Luke 6:20; Matt 11:11 with Luke 7:28; Matt 13:11 with Mark 4:11; Matt 13:31 with Mark 4:30 and Luke 13:18; Matt 13:33 with Luke 13:20; Matt 19:23 with Mark 10:23 and Luke 18:24.

and the Holy Spirit meant for the *kingdom of heaven* and the *kingdom of God* to be used interchangeably.<sup>27</sup>

Like Chafer before him, J. Dwight Pentecost describes not one kingdom, but three: the earthly kingdom, the spiritual kingdom, and the mystery form of the kingdom. All three are aspects of the kingdom program, which is an integral part of the dispensationalist's interpretive schema. A distinction is made between the scriptural terms *kingdom of God* and *kingdom of the heavens*, although the distinction is not absolute, and is determined by the context. The terms are recognized as being used interchangeably, yet Pentecost says they are not synonymous.<sup>28</sup>

Both common sense and grammatical rules tell us that if the terms *kingdom of God* and *kingdom of the heavens* are used interchangeably, then they are in fact synonymous---they in fact describe the same kingdom. When dispensationalists make distinctions between synonymous terms based on "their usage in the context,"<sup>29</sup> (usages only the dispensationalist sees,) they are straining at gnats and swallowing the camel (Matt 23:24).

## **The Existence of Evil in the Millennial Kingdom**

The dispensationalist describes the Sermon on the Mount as meant for the millennial kingdom and not for the church. This idea cannot be supported from the text, but is based on the interpretive schema imposed upon the scripture. This can be readily demonstrated using the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer. But before we begin, it is necessary to discuss the character of the millennial kingdom. While it is an earthly kingdom, dispensationalists describe it as having a spiritual character. According to J. Dwight Pentecost, it has the following characteristics: righteousness, obedience, holiness, truth, and the fullness of the Holy Spirit.<sup>30</sup>

Given the above description of the millennial kingdom, the Beatitudes are curious. They were written to the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the peacemakers, those persecuted for righteousness' sake, and those reviled and slandered for the sake of Christ. I submit that it is impossible to reconcile the beatitudes with the conditions prevailing during the millennial kingdom as described by the dispensationalists. If Satan is bound for the duration of the millennial kingdom, and if God the Son reigns upon the earth from the throne of David, then where is the mourning? If the Son---who is our peace---reigns upon the earth, where is the need for the peacemaker? If the accuser of the brethren is bound in Hell, where does the persecution come from?

The Lord's Prayer is often misunderstood by the dispensationalist, and this misunderstanding is used to demonstrate that it could not be meant for the church. This misunderstanding is partly

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<sup>27</sup> This presents a problem for the fundamentalists and the "verbal, plenary inspiration" of scripture, which is a 19<sup>th</sup> century theological innovation. If the very words are inspired, then how do we account for the differences in wording in parallel passages? The Lutheran understanding of the scriptures as being inspired because they are the Word of God is sufficient explanation.

<sup>28</sup> Pentecost, *op cit*, p. 144.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 482-487

a bad exegesis, but partly derived from the preexisting interpretive schema. In the Fifth Petition, we are asked to pray the following: “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matt 6:12). C. I. Scofield says the grounds for this forgiveness is the law, not grace. “Under law forgiveness is conditioned upon a like spirit in us; under grace we are forgiven for Christ’s sake, and exhorted to forgive because we have been forgiven.”<sup>31</sup> But in the Lord’s Prayer we are not asking God to forgive us *because* we forgive others, but simply asking God to forgive us. Our forgiveness of others is a consequence of the forgiveness we have received. “Freely ye have received, freely give” (Matt 10:8).

But an even larger problem concerns the Eighth Petition, where we pray the following: “deliver us from evil” (Matt 6:13). The Greek word for evil, *poneros*, is in the nominative case, which usually denotes a title. Thus the word refers both to all evil, and to the evil one (Satan). Luther’s small catechism explains the Eighth Petition this way:

*We pray in this petition, as in a summary, that our Father in heaven may deliver us from all manner of evil, whether it affect body or soul, property or reputation, and that at last, when the hour of death comes, he may grant us a blessed end and graciously take us from this world of sorrow to himself in heaven.*<sup>32</sup>

In the Eighth Petition, the word for evil is not a synonym for sin. Instead, it refers to all that has befallen us as a result of the curse, including death. Therefore when we ask God to deliver us from evil, we are asking God to lessen the effect of the curse upon our lives. And, of course, we are asking to be delivered from the evil one, the accuser of the brethren, the father of lies, the one who seeks to devour our very souls.

Having previously established what dispensationalists describe as the spiritual characteristics of the millennial kingdom, and their understanding that Satan is bound in Hell during this period, we must ask why anyone in such a kingdom would have need to pray the Eighth Petition? The answer is that there would be no need. The Lord’s Prayer is not for the millennial kingdom, but for the church of God on earth.

## **Faulty Christology and the Sermon on the Mount**

The dispensationalist schema drives the interpretation of scripture, such that the dispensationalist misses much of the richness of Christology. This is true especially of the Sermon on the Mount, which is Matthew’s first discourse. As David Scaer demonstrates, there is a connection between the Sermon on the Mount and later discourses. Matthew organizes his gospel such that the earlier statements of Jesus are explained or fulfilled by the later discourses, or by the actions of Jesus. Scaer’s own example of this is the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “forgive us our trespasses” (Mt 6:12), our understanding of which is fully realized

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<sup>31</sup> C.I. Scofield, *Scofield Reference Bible*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917) 1002.

<sup>32</sup> The Book of Concord, SC III, 20

in the light of Jesus later statement at the Last Supper that His blood is shed for the forgiveness of sins (26:28).<sup>33</sup>

This principle can be carried out in great detail throughout the Sermon on the Mount, but focusing on the Beatitudes is useful and sufficient. The Christological connections displayed in Appendix 1 are quite clear. The dispensationalist misses all the Christological richness expressed in the Beatitudes. He fails to see the Sermon on the Mount as part of Jesus' self-disclosure of himself as God<sup>34</sup>, and therefore misses the essential character of His reign. Having missed seeing the Sermon on the Mount in this way, and being a slave to his interpretive schema, the dispensationalist fails to see the fullness of God in Christ as revealed in the Sermon on the Mount. It is Jesus, and Jesus alone, who truly embodies all the virtues expressed in the Beatitudes. Because he alone is worthy, his broken body and shed blood accomplish for us all the promised benefits of the Beatitudes. Thanks be to God!

## **The Ubiquity of Christ, the Sacrament of the Altar, and the Kingdom**

The Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli held that Christ, being locally present at the right hand of the Father, could not at the same time be locally present in bread and wine, the elements of the Lord's Supper.<sup>35</sup> The Christ, in his human body of flesh and bone, could not be in two places at the same time. Lutherans who believe in the so-called Ubiquity of Christ have no problem with Christ being physically present at two places at the same time. Interestingly enough, the sacramentarian's denial of the ubiquity of Christ mitigates against any sort of millennial kingdom, although they fail to properly correlate the two doctrines.

The difficulty begins with ascribing a locality to the right hand of God, as though there was an actual place with an actual throne. The Formula of Concord describes the right hand of God as being the "right hand of majesty, power, and might, over everything that can be named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come [Eph. 1, 21]."<sup>36</sup> The Formula of Concord also states that Christ sits "at the right hand of the almighty power of God"<sup>37</sup>; that the right hand of God "is no fixed place in heaven...but nothing else than the almighty power of God, which fills heaven and earth."<sup>38</sup> And so we may be perfectly clear, the Formula of Concord states "And thus all the treasures of wisdom are hidden in Him, thus all power is given to Him, and He is seated at the right hand of the majesty and power of God."<sup>39</sup> The Lutheran doctrine as set forth

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<sup>33</sup> David Scaer, *Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church*, (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 27.

<sup>34</sup> Hans Schwartz, *Eschatology*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 75

<sup>35</sup> Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, [book online] (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950, accessed 28 October 2007) vol. XII, 52; available from <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc12/htm/ii.xvi.ii.htm#ii.xvi.iii>

<sup>36</sup> The Book of Concord, SD VIII, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 23

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 28

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 74

in the Formula of Concord is that the right hand of God is a reference to the majesty and power of God, not to an imagined locale:

*“But we hold that by these words [the above passages of Scripture] the majesty of the man Christ is declared, which Christ has received, according to His humanity, at the right hand of the majesty and power of God, namely, that also according to His assumed human nature and with the same, He can be, and also is, present where He will, and especially that in His Church and congregation on earth He is present as Mediator, Head, King, and High Priest, not in part, or one-half of Him only, but the entire person of Christ is present, to which both natures belong, the divine and the human; not only according to His divinity, but also according to, and with, His assumed human nature, according to which He is our Brother, and we are flesh of His flesh and bone of His bone.”<sup>40</sup>*

The argument for the sacramentarian<sup>41</sup> is that the ascended Christ maintains a local presence at the right hand of the Father. So what do the scriptures themselves have to say about the matter? Jesus himself, when arraigned before the high priest, announced: “Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven” (Matt 26:64). Notice that Jesus claims that he will be both seated at the right hand of the Father, and coming in the clouds of heaven. If the right hand of God denotes a mere local presence, this verse presents a difficulty, for in this verse Jesus claims he will be in two places at once. It can be argued that Jesus was describing two events separated in time, but as we will see, the kingdom of the Christ is a perpetual kingdom, not a part time thing.

In Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost, he makes reference to Christ being exalted by the right hand of God, then quotes the Ps 110:1, where God the Father asks the Son to sit at his right hand. This shows, as Peter states, “God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2: 33-36). According to Peter, the crucified, risen and ascended Christ is even then seated at the right hand of the Father. This is also the testimony of the first martyr, who testimony before the council was: “I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55-56). The apostle Paul also states that Christ “is even at the right hand of God” (Rom 8:34); and that “Christ sitteth on the right hand of God” (Col 3:1). The writer of Hebrews states that after he “had by himself purged our sins”, that he “sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb 1:3; cf 10:12; 12:2); and that Jesus, as our high priest, “is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens” (Heb 8:1). The apostle Peter writes that Jesus “is gone into heaven, and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him” (1 Pet 3:22). The clear testimony of scripture is that Jesus is even now seated at the right hand of the Father.

That the reign of the Christ at the right hand of God is perpetual is without doubt. Isaiah’s great prophecy of the Messiah contains this message: “Of the increase of *his* government and peace *there shall be* no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 78, 79

<sup>41</sup> The term for those who deny the physical, bodily presence of Christ in the elements of the Lord’s Supper.

establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this” (Isa 9:7). Other important passages are as follows: Ps 45:6; 93:1,2; 103:19; 145:10-13; Jer 10:10; Dan 2:44; 4:3, 34; 6:26; 7:13, 14, 18, 23-27; Mic 4:7; Lu 1:32,33; 1 Pet 4:11; 5:11; 2 Pet 1:11; Jud 1:25; Re 11:15.

The question for the sacramentarian and millennialist is this: if Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven; if the right hand of God describes a physical place; and if Christ can only be physically in one place at a time; how then can he also take his rightful place on the throne of David in Jerusalem during the millennium? Since the sacramentarians say that the Christ in his humanity can only be locally present in one place at a time, does he leave the right hand of the Father to take up a temporary throne upon the earth? How then can Christ’s spiritual reign at the right hand of God be described as being “from henceforth even for ever”?

The typical American Evangelical, and the dispensationalist in particular, are both sacramentarian and millennialist. By requiring the human nature of Christ constrain the full expression of His divinity, they have restricted his physical presence to a single locale. The millennialist requires the physical presence of Christ to be both at the right hand of the Father and upon the throne of David. Both cannot be true: Christ cannot be limited to only one locale, yet be present at two places at once. The typical American Evangelical, and the dispensationalists in particular, by denying the possibility of Christ’s bodily presence in the bread and wine, have also made it impossible for Christ to reign at the right hand of the Father and upon the throne of David.

## **Summary: Separating Truth from Error**

Dispensationalist theology postulates the existence of three kingdoms: one temporal, for the Jews; one heavenly, for the elect; one a mystery, describing the church in the dispensation of Grace. The dispensationalist, having built a theological system that requires God to have three kingdom programs fails to take Jesus at his word (“my kingdom is not of this world; the kingdom of God cometh not with observation.”) They fail to take into account the presupposition of the existence of evil that pervades the Sermon on the Mount, which they take to be the “constitution” of the millennial kingdom. The dispensationalist then rejects the words of Jesus by saying they are meant for the future millennial kingdom, not for the church. By rejecting Jesus’ word, the dispensationalist has therefore rejected Jesus himself.

Moreover, the dispensationalist has created a logical impossibility by restricting the humanity of Christ to one physical locale, while requiring Him to reign upon two thrones at the same time. This has important Christological implications, which we will not explore at this time.

It is clear from our discussion that dispensationalists do not interpret scripture literally, but instead interpret scripture based on their artificially imposed interpretive schema. This is bad hermeneutics and bad exegesis, leading to a faulty Christology, resulting in the rejection of Christ’s true kingdom and, ultimately, to Christ himself. Therefore, dispensationalism is a most grievous error.

## Appendix 1: Christological Connections in the Beatitudes

The Beatitudes	The Christological Connection
Blessed <i>are</i> the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (5:3)	The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air <i>have</i> nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay <i>his</i> head. (8:20).
Blessed <i>are</i> they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. (5:4)	O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, <i>thou</i> that killest <u>the prophets</u> , and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under <i>her</i> wings, and ye would not! (23:37)
Blessed <i>are</i> the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. (5:5)	Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him. And, behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out <i>his</i> hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest's, and smote off his ear. Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be? (26:50b-54)
Blessed <i>are</i> they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. (5:6)	For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen <i>it</i> , repented not afterward, that ye might believe him. (21:32)
Blessed <i>are</i> the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. (5:7)	But go ye and learn what <i>that</i> meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (9:13)
Blessed <i>are</i> the pure in heart: for they shall see God. (5:8)	Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. <i>Thou</i> blind Pharisee, cleanse first that <i>which is</i> within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead <i>men's</i> bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. (23:25-28)
Blessed <i>are</i> the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. (5:9)	Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven. Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. (10:32-34)
Blessed <i>are</i> they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (5:10)	Pilate saith unto them, What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? <i>They</i> all say unto him, Let him be crucified. And the governor said, Why, what evil hath he done? But they cried out the more, saying, Let him be crucified. (27:22-23)
Blessed are ye, when <i>men</i> shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great <i>is</i> your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. (5:11-12)	But Jesus held his peace. And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus saith unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven. Then the high priest rent his clothes, saying, He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? behold, now ye have heard his blasphemy. What think ye? They answered and said, He is guilty of death. (26:63-66)

Table 1: The Christological Connections of the Beatitudes