

# **The Negative Impact of Kingdom Now Theology on a Dispensational Worldview**

**By Dr. Andrew M. Woods**

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Here, we will note why the trend of equating God’s present work in the church with the Messianic kingdom is a matter believers should be concerned about, since this theology not only radically alters God’s design for the church but is also the seedbed of many major false doctrines that have sadly entered Christ’s church.<sup>1</sup> Our goal here is to demonstrate to the reader that one’s view concerning a present or future kingdom has real-world implications in terms of how one works out one’s theology in the life of the local church and in the real world. In other words, ideas have consequences. Theological studies can be likened to dominoes in a row. Knocking over just one domino inevitably impacts the other dominoes. Similarly, when one area of theology is altered it has an inevitable impact upon other areas of systematic theology and biblical interpretation. Here, a brief examination will be given regarding how “kingdom now” theology has an inevitable impact upon other areas of biblical truth.

### **Changing the Church’s Purpose**

Why does it matter whether Christ’s present work through the church is equated with Christ’s Messianic kingdom? The answer to this question lies in the fact that “kingdom now” theology alters the divine design for the church. Another way of saying this is one’s eschatology (his view of the future kingdom) affects his ecclesiology (doctrine of the church).

The church, which began in Acts 2,<sup>2</sup> exists for *three* specific, divinely-ordained reasons.<sup>3</sup> *First*, the church exists to glorify God (Eph. 3:21). *Second*, the church exists to edify or build up its members. God has placed spiritual gifts in the body of Christ for the purpose of being faithfully employed so that the church members can be built up, become spiritually mature, and reach unity (Eph. 4:11–16). *Third*, the church exists for the purpose of accomplishing world evangelism (Mark 16:15) and to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20).

However, Alva J. McClain explains how these basic and divinely-given ecclesiastical purposes rapidly become confused the moment that the church begins to view itself as the kingdom:

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<sup>1</sup> The material presented here is taken and adapted from Andrew M. Woods, *The Coming Kingdom: What Is the Kingdom and How Is Kingdom Now Theology Changing the Focus of the Church?* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2016), 341-78.

<sup>2</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 463-66.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Lightner, class notes of Andy Woods in ST5104 Soteriology, Dallas Theological Seminary.

Theological confusion, especially in matters which have to do with the church, will inevitably produce consequences which are of grave practical concern. The identification of the Kingdom with the church has led historically to ecclesiastical policies and programs which, even when not positively evil, have been far removed from the original simplicity of the New Testament *ekklēssia*. It is easy to claim that in the “present kingdom of grace” that the rule of the saints is wholly “spiritual,” exerted only through moral principles and influence. But practically, once the church becomes the Kingdom in any realistic theological sense, it is impossible to draw any clear line between principles and their implementation through political and social devices. For the logical implications of a present ecclesiastical *kingdom* are unmistakable, and historically have always led in one direction, i.e., political control of the state by the church. The distances traveled down this road by various religious movements, and the forms of control which were developed, have been widely different. The difference is very great between the Roman Catholic system and modern Protestant efforts to control the state; also between the ecclesiastical rule of Calvin in Geneva and the fanaticism of Münster and the English “fifth-monarchy.” But the basic assumption is always the same: The church in some sense is the kingdom, and therefore has a divine right to rule; or it is the business of the church to “establish” fully the Kingdom of God among men. Thus the church loses its pilgrim character and the sharp edge of its divinely commissioned “witness” is blunted. It becomes an *ekklēssia* which is not only in the world, but also of the world. It forgets that just as in the regeneration of the soul only God can effect the miracle, even so the “regeneration” of the world can only be wrought by the intrusion of regal power from on high (Matt. 19:28).<sup>4</sup>

McClain’s quote notes several problems when the church begins to see itself as the kingdom. Based upon this lengthy quote, McClain explains how these basic and divinely-given ecclesiastical purposes rapidly become confused the moment that the church begins to view itself as the kingdom. When the church sees itself as the kingdom it typically seeks to grasp the reins of political power and rule by the sword. This philosophy represents a far cry from God’s design for the church, which is to evangelize and disciple, or reach and teach, in fulfillment of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20). While it remains appropriate for the church to positively influence fallen culture in some sense (Matt. 5:13–16; 2 Thess. 2:6–7), she is not called to rule and reign in the present age with kingdom

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<sup>4</sup> Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 438–39.

authority. Instead, the church is to await the future, earthly, Messianic Kingdom when Christ will rule and reign with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:9; Rev. 12:5). Until that glorious future day arrives, the world will remain under Satan's influence (2 Cor. 4:4), and consequently the church will be living as a pilgrim in enemy territory.

McClain's preceding quote notes at least *three* problems that emerge when the church sees itself as the kingdom and seeks to reign with kingdom authority in the present. *First*, the church ceases to see itself as a pilgrim in the world but rather sees herself at home in the world. A pilgrim is one who is simply passing through a temporary realm toward a final destination. In the same way, this world is not the church's home but rather is a temporary sphere that the church is passing through on her way to eternal glory. Chafer notes, "So the church was fully warned from the beginning about the nature of this age, and taught concerning her pilgrim character while here and her holy calling and separateness from the 'evil age.'"<sup>5</sup> This theological reality explains why the New Testament often uses pilgrimage imagery to depict the church in the world (Jas. 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11; Heb. 11:13).

*Second*, if the church pursues worldly power, she becomes distracted from her divine mission to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20). God only promises to bless and empower the church when she remains within His intended design. Once the church becomes something that God never called her to be, she is emptied of this divine power. If Satan can convince the church to become involved in projects that she was never given the power to fulfill, he will have effectively neutralized the church. Bestselling author Hal Lindsey warned what could happen to the church in the last days if she began to see herself as the establisher of God's kingdom on the earth: "The last days of the church on the earth may be largely wasted seeking to accomplish a task that only the LORD Himself can and will do directly."<sup>6</sup>

### **Social Gospel**

*Third*, seeing the church as the kingdom causes the church to substitute social causes in lieu of preaching the true gospel. The Great Commission is subtly transformed from evangelism and discipleship to altering societal structures. In other words, rather than fulfilling the Great Commission, the church perceives its central purpose as fixing societal ills such as curing cancer, ending world poverty and hunger, and establishing social justice. The collective salvation of nations or communities replaces the individual salvation of souls. This philosophy and misguided emphasis is known as the "Social Gospel." Note this emphasis in the writings of progressive dispensationalist and "kingdom now" theologian Craig Blaising, who laments, "Unfortunately, present-day dispensationalists have

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 5:350.

<sup>6</sup> Hal Lindsey, *The Road to Holocaust* (New York: Bantam, 1990), 269.

written very little in proposing a theology of social ministry.”<sup>7</sup> He continues, “if we as a community of Christ worked on creating our community as a model of social justice and peace, then we really would have some suggestions to make for social reform in our cities and nations.”<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to note Social Gospel language in the writings of the “kingdom now” Emergent Church leaders. For example, Brian McLaren is clearly a kingdom now advocate. He argues, “If Revelation were a blueprint of the distant future, it would have been unintelligible to its original readers. . . . In light of this, Revelation becomes a powerful book about *the kingdom of God here and now*, available to all” (italics added). Consequently, Brian McLaren laments, “The church has been preoccupied with the question, ‘What happens to your soul after you die?’ As if the reason for Jesus coming can be summed up in, ‘Jesus is trying to get more souls into heaven as opposed to hell, after they die.’ I just think a fair reading of the Gospels blows that out of the water.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, because the church sees itself as the kingdom, it would not consider the salvation of souls its top priority. Rather, it should instead also pursue a “holistic gospel” focused upon altering societal structures.

Of course, this mindset does not represent the mission that God gave to the church. It only serves to distract her from her divine priorities and calling. Ryrice explains how such priorities can easily get out of order: “Holistic redemption can easily lead to placing unbalanced, if not wrong, priorities on political action, social agendas, and improving the structures of society.”<sup>10</sup> While ecclesiastical humanitarian effort is not wrong in and of itself, such efforts should always be used as a platform to proclaim the gospel or practically demonstrate Christ-like love so as to gain a hearing to share the gospel. If the gospel becomes eclipsed by humanitarian concerns, then our priorities are grossly out of order. After all, what good does it really do in the eternal scheme of things to feed someone’s stomach with a meal that only has a lasting impact of twenty-four hours, if he is never given the gospel and consequently his soul goes into an eternal hell?

Like McLaren, Rick Warren also embraces “kingdom now” theology:

I stand before you confidently right now and say to you that God is going to use you to change the world. . . . I’m looking at a stadium full of people right now who are telling God they will do *whatever it takes to establish God’s Kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven.”* What will happen if the followers of Jesus say to Him, “We are

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<sup>7</sup> Craig Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 14, n. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Craig Blaising, “Theological and Ministerial Issues in Progressive Dispensationalism,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, ed. Darrell Bock and Craig Blaising (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), 288–89.

<sup>9</sup> Brian McLaren, cited in Roger Oakland, *Faith Undone* (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails, 2007), 158, 203.

<sup>10</sup> Charles C. Ryrice, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 176.

yours?” What kind of spiritual awakening will occur? (Italics added).<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, Social Gospel is also apparent in the work of “kingdom now” advocate Rick Warren. He calls his global mission strategy the “PEACE” plan.

P.E.A.C.E. is an acronym for Promote reconciliation; Equip servant leaders; Assist the poor; Care for the sick; and Educate the next generation. Coalition members see these actions as Jesus’ antidote to five “global giants,”—problems that affect billions of people worldwide: spiritual emptiness, self-centered leadership, poverty, pandemic disease, and illiteracy.<sup>12</sup>

What do you *not* clearly hear about in this description of Warren’s peace plan? There’s nothing here about preaching the gospel. What an astounding omission this is, especially considering that the gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). There is also nothing here about fulfilling the Great Commission to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). There’s nothing here either about Christ’s final words to the church as recorded in Mark 16:15, where Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” Furthermore, there is no hint in any other Great Commission passage (John 20:21; Luke 24:46–48; Acts 1:8) to go and slay “the five global giants.” Rather, the entire emphasis of these Great Commission texts is upon evangelism and discipleship. The Great Commission has largely become the “great omission” through the influence of Rick Warren and others. Kingdom building, societal transformation, and Social Gospel have largely replaced the church’s central calling to evangelize and disciple. Thus, kingdom now theology should be avoided not only because it is not scripturally supported, but also because it alters the divine purpose for the church, thereby robbing her of divine power and blessing.

### **Larkin’s Warnings**

Earlier, we called attention to Alva J. McClain’s warning concerning the impact of how “kingdom now” negatively impacts the church’s calling, purpose, and mission. It is interesting to observe similar warnings given nearly a century ago in the writings of Clarence Larkin:

[T]he Church is not an “Organization” but an “Organism.” Therefore it is not a “Social Club,” organized and

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<sup>11</sup> Cited in Oakland, 153.

<sup>12</sup> “Rick Warren and 1,700 Leaders Launch the Peace Coalition at Purpose Driven Summit,” accessed November 15, 2014, <http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/249586720.html>.

supported solely for the benefit of its members. Neither is it a “Place of Amusement” to pander to the carnal nature of man. Nor is it a “House of Merchandise” for the sale of “Indulgences,” or other commodities, whereby the money of the ungodly can be secured to save the penurious church member a little self-sacrifice. Neither is it a “Reform Bureau” to save the “bodies” of men. The reformation of men is very commendable, as are all forms of “Social Service,” but that is not the work or mission of the Church. The world was just as full, if not fuller, of the evils that afflict society today, in the days of Christ, but He never, nor did the Apostles, organize any reform agencies. All the great philanthropic and civilizing agencies of the world are “By-Products” of Christianity. We are told in Acts 5:15, that the people laid their sick in the streets that the “Shadow of Peter” might fall upon them and heal them. But if Peter had spent his time “casting shadows,” and neglected his Apostolic work of trying to save the “SOULS” of men, his shadow would have lost its power. Jesus knew that the source of all the evils in the world is SIN, and that the only way to eradicate sin is to Regenerate the Human Heart, and so He gave the GOSPEL, and the “Mission” of the Church is to carry this Gospel to the world. “EVANGELISM,” not “Social Service,” is the “Mission” of the Church. Mark 16:15–16. The great mistake the Church has made is in appropriating to herself in this Dispensation the promises of earthly conquest and glory which belong exclusively to Israel in the “Millennial Age.” As soon as the Church enters into an “Alliance with the World,” and seeks the help of Parliaments, Congresses, Legislatures, Federations and Reform Societies, largely made up of ungodly men and women, she loses her spiritual power and becomes helpless as a redeeming force.<sup>13</sup>

Larkin further notes:

[T]he “Mission” of the Church is her “COMMISSON” to “Evangelize” the world. Mark 16:15–16. Acts 1:7–8. The “Kingdom Idea” has robbed the Church of her “UPWARD LOOK,” and of the “BLESSED HOPE.” There cannot be any “Imminent Coming” to those who are seeking to “Set up the Kingdom.” The “Kingdom Idea” has robbed the Church of the “Pilgrim” and “Martyr Spirit,” and caused it to go down into Egypt for help. When the Church enters into an “Alliance with the World,” and seeks the help of Parliaments, Congresses, Legislatures, Federations and Reform Societies, largely made up of

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<sup>13</sup> Clarence Larkin, *Rightly Dividing the Word* (Glenside, PA: Clarence Larkin Estate, 1920), 48.

ungodly men and women, she loses her “SPIRITUAL POWER” and becomes helpless as a redeeming force. The end of such an “Alliance” will be a “Religious Political Regime” that will pave the way for the revelation of Satan’s great “Religious Political Leader” and “Superman”—the ANTICHRIST.<sup>14</sup>

Here, Larkin notes at least *five* consequences that “kingdom now” theology has upon Ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the church. *First*, “kingdom now” theology causes the church to drift into a Social Gospel agenda favoring holistic redemption of societal structures in lieu of fulfilling the Great Commission. When the church becomes something that God never intended nor called her to be, she cannot expect, and in fact will be emptied of, His divine resources and empowerment. *Second*, viewing itself as the kingdom of God upon the earth causes the church to become at home in the world in contradistinction to the New Testament portrayal of the church as a mere pilgrim passing through both temporary and alien territory en route to her ultimate eternal destination. Both of these points were covered previously. However, let us now take note of *three* equally important points that Larkin’s above comments surface.

### **Alliances with Non-Biblical Groups**

*Third*, because there are not presently and numerically enough Christians necessary to establish God’s kingdom upon the earth, it becomes necessary for the church to find common ground with those who do not share its biblical convictions in order to build the political coalition needed to implement a “kingdom now” social agenda. As noted above, Larkin well explains:

The great mistake the Church has made is in appropriating to herself in this Dispensation the promises of earthly conquest and glory which belong exclusively to Israel in the “Millennial Age.” As soon as the Church enters into an “Alliance with the World,” and seeks the help of Parliaments, Congresses, Legislatures, Federations and Reform Societies, largely made up of ungodly men and women, she loses her spiritual power and becomes helpless as a redeeming force.<sup>15</sup>

Previously, we noted the “kingdom now” agenda behind popular pastor Rick Warren’s “PEACE” plan. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that Warren has become one of the leading advocates of ecumenism in our day. Recently, the “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” mantra has been given new life by megachurch pastor and bestselling author Rick Warren. In a recent interview with Catholic News Service, he noted:

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<sup>14</sup> Clarence Larkin, *The Second Coming of Christ* (Glenside, PA: Clarence Larkin Estate, 1918), 51.

<sup>15</sup> Larkin, *Rightly Dividing the Word*, 48.

*We have far more in common than what divides us.* When you talk about Pentecostals, charismatics, evangelicals, fundamentalists, Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, on and on and on and on. Well, they would all say we believe in the trinity; we believe in the Bible; we believe in the resurrection; we believe salvation is through Jesus Christ. *These are the big issues. Sometimes Protestants think that Catholics worship Mary like she's another god. But that's not exactly catholic doctrine. . . .* and people say well *what are the saints all about? Why are you praying to the saints? And when you understand what they mean by what they're saying there's a whole lot more commonality.* Now there are still real differences, no doubt about that. *But the most important thing is if you love Jesus, we're on the same team.* The unity that I think we would see realistically is not a structural unity but *a unity of mission.* And so, when it comes to the family we are co-workers in the field on this for the protection of what we call the sanctity of life, the sanctity of sex, and the sanctity of marriage. *So there's a great commonality and there's no division* on any of those three. Many times people have been beaten down for taking a biblical stance. And they start to feel, "Well, maybe I'm out here all by yourself." No, you're not (italics added).<sup>16</sup>

Has Warren forgotten that we, as Protestants, broke away from the Roman Catholic Church during the days of Martin Luther and John Calvin? Why the existence of this historical rupture between Protestants and Catholics? The answer to this question lies in the fact that we as Protestants saw things in Roman Catholicism that we could not find in Scripture. There are vast and insurmountable theological divisions between Bible-believing Evangelicals and the Roman Catholic Church. The rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation involved the five "*solas*." "*Sola*" is a Latin expression meaning "alone." These five solas are *Sola Fide* (faith alone), *Sola Gratia* (grace alone), *Solus Christus* (Christ alone), *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), and *Soli Deo Gloria* (to the glory of God alone). While Protestants embrace these five theological realities or *solas*, Roman Catholic theology rejects them.<sup>17</sup> Yet, the "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" mindset erases all of those theological barriers and puts Evangelicals and Catholics on the same theological footing.

Apparently not content to build a bridge to Catholicism only, Warren also seems to be building a similar bridge into Islam. Such advocacy of interfaith cooperation across vastly divergent belief systems is revealed through many of

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<sup>16</sup> Matt Slick, "Rick Warren's Comments on Roman Catholicism," accessed July 20, 2015, <http://www.carm.org>.

<sup>17</sup> For more differences between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, see James McCarthy, *The Gospel According to Rome* (Eugene, OR: Harvest, 1995).



Warren's public statements. Note Warren's words from a recent World Economic Forum panel discussion:

To my Islamic brother here from Italy, I would say I'm not really interested in inter-faith dialogue; I'm interested in inter-faith projects. We've got enough talk. So . . . a few weeks ago, at Georgetown University, we brought in three imams, we brought in three Catholic priests, we brought in three evangelical pastors, and we brought in three Rabbis and we said, "What can we do about AIDS?" And we started on some common ground on those issues; what can we do that we all care about?<sup>18</sup>

Note how Rick Warren, with Tony Blair present at this World Economic Forum panel discussion, publicly referred to an Islamic cleric as "My Islamic brother." The New Testament, on the other hand, teaches that our brothers are only those who believe in Christ and do the will of God (Matt. 12:46–50). Thus, in no sense can an Islamic cleric be viewed as a brother of a born-again believer.

Note, for example, the following prayer that Warren offered on January 21, 2009 at President-elect Obama's inauguration: "I humbly ask this in the name of the one who changed my life, Yeshua, *Isa*, Jesus [Spanish pronunciation], Jesus, who taught us to pray" (italics added).<sup>19</sup> While most would recognize in Warren's prayer the Hebrew rendering of Jesus (*Yeshua*) as well as the Spanish pronunciation of the name Jesus, who is "Isa"? World religions expert Eric Barger well explains Isa's true identity:

There I was, watching all of the regalia of the presidential inauguration. . . . Of course, I was also waiting to see just what kind of prayer Rick Warren had co-opted to pray for the new incoming President and his administration. . . . The inaugural prayer was proceeding along and Warren was rightly praying for God to lead and protect Obama. . . . So, just when I thought I could say, "Amen," it happened. Warren said, "I humbly ask this in the name of the one who changed my life, Yeshua, *Isa*, Jesus [Spanish pronunciation], Jesus, who taught us to pray, "Our father who art in Heaven. . .". I have researched Islam for many years. Last year I ministered concerning the history, theology, and intentions of Islam over 40 times in churches and conferences; so naturally, Warren's use of the name of *Isa*, the false Jesus of Islam, was a glaring slap in the face to all that he had already prayed. "Isa" in no way represents the Jesus of the Bible but is instead the false Jesus of the Qur'an (Koran) and the Muslim Hadith. "Isa" (pronounced "eee-sa") is the Islamic Jesus who was but a prophet and who certainly did not experience a sacrificial death on a cross

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<sup>18</sup> [http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=nu7\\_rtUQiE0](http://m.youtube.com/watch?v=nu7_rtUQiE0)

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_detailpage&v=tJeNsPIC3vE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=tJeNsPIC3vE)

let alone resurrect from the dead. In fact, in Islam the prophet Isa is actually the destroyer of Christianity—not its Savior. Obviously, this is simply NOT the same Jesus as is Yeshua.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, Warren in his inaugural prayer seems to equate the Muslim Jesus with the biblical Jesus. The bottom line is that if you are going to try to build the Kingdom of God on the earth, there are not enough Christians in the world to accomplish this goal. Thus, you have to start cooperating with people of different faiths, like Catholics and Muslims. Such spiritual ecumenism represents the natural outworking of the church viewing itself as the kingdom of God.

### **Dispensing with Prophetic Truth**

*Fourth*, Larkin observed that the discarding of the study of Bible prophecy naturally takes place when “kingdom now” theology gains a foothold in the church. As noted earlier, Larkin observed, “The ‘Kingdom Idea’ has robbed the Church of her ‘UPWARD LOOK,’ and of the ‘BLESSED HOPE.’ There cannot be any ‘Imminent Coming’ to those who are seeking to ‘Set up the Kingdom.’”<sup>21</sup> After all, why be overly preoccupied with God’s predicted prophetic plan involving the future overthrow of the Antichrist and His subsequent reign if the church is presently bringing in the kingdom?

For example, George Gunn notices a historic decline in assigning to the Lord’s promise in John 14:1–4 an imminent return significance the more the church began to embrace kingdom now theology. Gunn notes how the early church in its first two centuries prior to its embracement of kingdom now theology tenaciously held to an imminent return interpretation of John 14:1–4. There existed support for a “heavenly and eschatological” interpretation of John 14:1–4 among the earliest church fathers. Gunn cites and quotes five Ante-Nicene fathers who interpreted John 14:1–4 in this manner. They include Papias (ca. 110), Irenaeus (ca. 130–202), Tertullian (ca. 196–212), Origen (ca. 182–251), and Cyprian (d. 258).<sup>22</sup> Thus, Gunn concludes:

So we see that, from the earliest years following the death of the apostle John, through the mid-third century, the promise of John 14:1–3 was seen in terms of a future coming to receive believers to heaven. The Ante-Nicene fathers did not think that this promise had been fulfilled either in Christ’s own resurrection or in the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And since the promise was seen as something to be fulfilled in conjunction with the believer’s

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<sup>20</sup> Eric Barger, “Rick Warren Invokes the Name of Islamic Jesus at Obama Inauguration” (January 2009), accessed January 4, 2015,

<http://www.ericbarger.com/emailers/2009/update1-21-2009.htm>.

<sup>21</sup> Larkin, *The Second Coming of Christ*, 51.

<sup>22</sup> George A. Gunn, “Jesus and the Rapture: John 14,” in *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 104.

bodily resurrection, they clearly were not thinking in terms of multiple comings being fulfilled at individual Christians' deaths, much less of a spiritual coming at the salvation of each individual Christian, but of a future day when all believers will be raised to receive their rewards.<sup>23</sup>

However, Gunn further observes how interpreting John 14:1–4 as the hope of the rapture began to wane as the church began to embrace kingdom now theology:

Interestingly, references to John 14:1–3 virtually disappear when perusing the writings of the Nicene and Post-Nicene fathers. This is a bit surprising, given the abundance of material in these later writers when compared with the Ante-Nicenes. I would assume that with the rise of Augustinian amillennialism and its optimistic interpretation regarding the present arrival of the Kingdom of God, the kind of hope held out in John 14:1–3 ceased to hold relevance.<sup>24</sup>

As already noted, popular pastor Rick Warren is heavily involved in a kingdom now agenda through his “PEACE” plan. Thus, it should also come as no surprise that Warren is a leading critic of those who invest time and energy into seeking to discover what the Bible reveals concerning the future. Interestingly, Warren appears to have a special animus for those who he deems are overly preoccupied with eschatology, which is the study of God’s plan for the future. He writes:

When the disciples wanted to talk about prophecy, Jesus quickly switched the conversation to evangelism. He wanted them to concentrate on their mission in the world. He said in essence, “The details of my return are none of your business. What is your business is the mission I have given you. Focus on that!” If you want Jesus to come back sooner, focus on fulfilling your mission, not figuring out prophecy. Speculating on the exact timing of Christ’s return is futile, because Jesus said, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Since Jesus said He didn’t know the day or hour, why should you try to figure it out? What we do know for sure is this: Jesus will not return until everyone God wants to hear the Good News has heard it. Jesus said, “The Good News about God’s kingdom will be preached in all the world, to every nation. Then the end will come.” If you want Jesus to come back sooner, focus on fulfilling your mission, not figuring out prophecy. It is easy to

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 119, n. 22.

get distracted and sidetracked from your mission because Satan would rather have you do anything besides sharing your faith. He will let you do all kinds of good things as long as you don't take anyone to heaven with you. But the moment you become serious about your mission, expect the Devil to throw all kinds of diversions at you. When that happens, remember the words of Jesus: "Anyone who lets himself be distracted from the work I plan for him is not fit for the Kingdom of God."<sup>25</sup>

According to Warren's line of thought, those that overly meditate upon the over a quarter of the Bible devoted to eschatological truth<sup>26</sup> are date setting, pursuing unchristlike priorities, unconcerned about evangelism, involved in a distraction, being influenced by Satan, and are unfit for the Kingdom of God! Yet the study of Bible prophecy should not be so quickly discredited and discarded since "we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19).

Progressive Dispensationalists also emphasize "kingdom now" theology through their belief that Christ now orchestrates an "already" and spiritual phase of the Davidic Kingdom as He now reigns from David's Throne, allegedly in heaven. Thus, it again is not surprising to discover that Progressive Dispensationalists deemphasize Bible Prophecy in general. Key prophetic passages receive scant attention in their teachings and writings. Charles Ryrie observes how Progressive Dispensationalists are guilty of:

...ignoring the great prophecy of the seventy weeks in Daniel 9:24–27. Nowhere in the progressives' writings to date have I found any discussion of the passage, only very brief and occasional citations of the reference itself. . . . While not denying the pre-tribulation Rapture or the literal tribulation period, revisionists do not give much attention to these aspects of eschatology. Blaising and Bock do not take obvious opportunities to mention the Rapture, and in one place (discussing 1 Thessalonians 5) they say only that the rapture "would appear to be pre-tribulational." They decry (as do many of us normative dispensationalists) the sensationalism of some interpreters of prophecy. But abuse of a doctrine is no reason for playing down the truth of that doctrine. Rather, it ought to make us more zealous to present it accurately and in a balanced fashion. Furthermore, there exists already in the writings of progressives a thrust towards positioning the Revelation as a book that is "difficult" to interpret. Playing up the imagery in the book, as some revisionists do, seems to play down a

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<sup>25</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 285–86.

<sup>26</sup> J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy: The Complete Guide to Scriptural Predictions and Their Fulfillment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 674–75.

plain interpretation of it. The locusts in chapter 9 and Babylon in chapters 17 and 18 are examples of such “literal/symbolic difficulty” in interpreting the book.<sup>27</sup>

The writings of Progressive Dispensationalists demonstrate a consistent obscuring of eschatological passages. They no longer seem to be approaching the prophetic texts with the same consistent, literal method of interpretation that has characterized prior generations of prophecy students. For example, Progressive Dispensationalist David Turner intimates that Revelation 21:21, which states that the twelve gates of the eternal city will be pearls, should not be interpreted literally because no oysters large enough to produce pearls of such a size exist.<sup>28</sup> Along these same lines, Turner suggests that this same verse, which speaks of streets of gold, cannot be interpreted literally because not enough gold is available to pave such a large city.<sup>29</sup> To Turner’s contentions for treating Revelation 21:21 non-literally, classical dispensationalist Robert Thomas appropriately retorts: “Yet these are paltry reasons for denying literality; the resources available to an infinite God to create such a city are beyond present condition. Far more materials are available to him than the humans of the present era can possibly comprehend.”<sup>30</sup>

It is no secret that a new translation of the Bible, known as the New English Translation or the *NET Bible*, was created primarily by Progressive Dispensationalists. It is interesting to note how this work marginalizes key prophetic texts that were once considered clear by prior generations. For example, ample scholarship has established that Christ’s promise to His disciples found in John 14:1–4 represents a promise of the Rapture of the church.<sup>31</sup> The NET Bible, by contrast, interprets these verses as a promise of the coming Holy Spirit that was already fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, past Dispensational scholarship has interpreted the first sixty-nine weeks of Daniel’s prophecy of the Seventy Weeks (Dan. 9:25–26) as representing a precise Messianic prophecy pinpointing the exact day of Christ’s triumphal entry on Palm Sunday.<sup>33</sup> The NET Bible, by contrast, denies such an interpretation even going so far as to say that the details of the text “make a messianic interpretation of the passage difficult, if not impossible.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 176–77.

<sup>28</sup> David L. Turner, “The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1–22:5: Consummation of a Biblical Continuum,” *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed., Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 277.

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

<sup>30</sup> Robert L. Thomas, “A Classical Dispensationalist View of Revelation,” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 209–10.

<sup>31</sup> Gunn, “Jesus and the Rapture: John 14,” 99–121; Renald Showers, *Maranatha Our Lord, Come!: A Definitive Study of the Rapture of the Church* (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel, 1995), 154–75.

<sup>32</sup> *New English Translation*, Beta ed. (Biblical Studies Press, 2001), 1985–86.

<sup>33</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 115–39.

<sup>34</sup> *New English Translation*, 1604.

Other examples of how Progressive Dispensationalists consistently marginalize key eschatological texts can be cited. Nowhere is the interpreter's willingness to lay aside his presuppositions more severely tested than in how he deciphers the predictions of the millennial temple and sacrifices as depicted in Ezekiel 40–48. Many interpreters reflexively and instinctively allegorize this section of Scripture because it is difficult for them to harmonize its plain language with statements found in Hebrews indicating that Christ's death rendered obsolete the animal sacrifices instituted under the Mosaic Law. Progressive Dispensationalists similarly seem to reject a straightforward reading of Ezekiel 40–48, instead opting for what amounts to a partially allegorical view of these important chapters. According to the view espoused by Mark F. Rooker, he “does not take the sacrifices in a literal sense but views Ezekiel writing in the 6th century B.C. describing worship from his unique perspective. . . . Ezekiel in referring to the literal worship of Yahweh in the millennium would be forced to use terms and concepts with which his audience was familiar.”<sup>35</sup>

Thus, Rooker understands Ezekiel's temple vision as contextualized for his sixth-century B.C. audience. Because Ezekiel's audience would understand restoration in terms of the restoration of sacrifices, Ezekiel merely described restoration in these terms. Thus, Ezekiel's vision must not be understood as predicting the literal restoration of sacrifices in the millennium. By allegorizing only part of Ezekiel's temple vision, Rooker's attempt at harmonization is at least less radical than the way many theologians allegorize away the entire temple vision. However, it still resorts to the allegorizing of Ezekiel's plain language. Ezekiel plainly states that millennial temple sacrifices will be an ongoing reality throughout the millennial age.

Progressive Dispensationalist Robert Chisholm also adopts this same partially allegorical approach when he says:

Ezekiel's vision of a Temple and a restored nation was not fulfilled in the postexilic period. How then should we expect the vision to be fulfilled? Scholars have answered this question in a variety of ways. On one end of the interpretive spectrum are those who see the vision as purely symbolic and as fulfilled in the New Testament church. On the opposite end are the hyper-literalists, who contend that the vision will be fulfilled exactly as described during the millennial age. In attempting to answer the question, one must first recognize that Ezekiel's vision is contextualized for his sixth-century B.C. audience. He describes the reconciliation of God and his people in terms that would be meaningful to his audience. They would naturally conceive of such reconciliation as involving the rebuilding of the temple, the reinstatement of the sacrificial system, the renewal of the Davidic dynasty, and the return and reunification of the twelve exiled tribes. Since the

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<sup>35</sup> Mark F. Rooker, “Evidences from Ezekiel,” in *A Case for Premillennialism*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 133.

fulfillment of the vision transcends these culturally conditioned boundaries, we should probably view it as idealized to some extent and look for an essential, rather than an exact fulfillment of many of its features. . . .

The inclusion of so many minute details suggests that the temple described here will be a literal reality in the Jerusalem of the future. . . . However, the final sacrifice of Jesus Christ has made the Levitical system obsolete. . . . To return to this system, with its sin offerings and such, would be a serious retrogression. Ezekiel's audience would have found it impossible to conceive of a restored covenant community apart from the sacrificial system. Now that the fulfillment of the vision transcends that cultural context, we can expect it to be essentially fulfilled when the Israel of the future celebrates the redemptive work of their savior in their new temple. . . .

Ezekiel's audience would have found this portrayal quite natural. However, Jesus, the one who fulfills the vision, will have no need to offer such sacrifices, nor will he institute a dynasty.<sup>36</sup>

As yet another example of how kingdom now theologians marginalize prophetic truth, many progressive dispensationalists refuse to interpret Old Testament prophecies regarding Babylon's destruction in a literal sense, thereby allowing them to find their ultimate fulfillment outside of the time period of the Old Testament prophets and instead in the events of the future Tribulation period (Rev. 17–18). They instead contend that the prophecies of Babylon's destruction found in Isaiah 13–14 and Jeremiah 50–51 were “essentially fulfilled” in 539 B.C. when Medo–Persia overthrew Babylon (Dan. 5) and therefore these prophecies do not await a future fulfillment. Progressive Dispensational critics of the literal Babylon view, such as Marvin Pate and Daniel Hays, maintain that these prophetic texts predicting Babylon's destruction should not be approached with a wooden literalistic hermeneutic that demands that every minute prophetic detail come to pass before these prophecies can be labeled fulfilled.<sup>37</sup> Progressive Dispensationalist Robert Chisholm calls such language “stylized and exaggerated” and therefore argues that these texts were “essentially fulfilled” with the historic defeat of Babylon.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, the inaugurated eschatology of Progressive Dispensationalism seems to de-emphasize the doctrine of the millennium. Although Progressive Dispensationalism still holds to premillennialism, the millennium loses some of its significance in their system. The millennium occupies a prominent position in traditional Dispensationalism as it represents the time period when the Old Testament kingdom promises will be fulfilled. However, with Progressive

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<sup>36</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 285–86.

<sup>37</sup> C. Marvin Pate and J. Daniel Hays, *Iraq-Babylon of the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 41.

<sup>38</sup> Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 53, 213.

Dispensationalism, the millennium loses some of this uniqueness as it represents a mere intensification of an already inaugurated kingdom. Progressive Dispensationalist Darrell Bock has called into question whether the millennium represents a literal one-thousand year time period.<sup>39</sup> While not denying the reality of a future earthly kingdom, Bock seems to question whether this earthly kingdom will last a literal one-thousand year duration in spite of the fact that this specific number is mentioned six times in the span of just ten verses (Rev. 20:1–10). This minimization of the millennium is represented in the admission that Progressive Dispensationalism is less “land centered” and less “future centered” than traditional Dispensationalism.<sup>40</sup> The progressive dispensational marginalizing of the millennium is also evidenced in the way the system lumps it together with the Eternal State, thus causing these two concepts to comprise the first and second part of the final dispensation.<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, amillennialist Bruce Waltke has criticized Progressive Dispensationalism for retaining the doctrine of the millennium. Waltke contends that some of the statements of progressive dispensationalists logically remove the need for a millennium.<sup>42</sup>

Again, the bottom line is that if the kingdom is now then the present should be our focus rather than some future event. Such a presupposition logically leads to either a discarding or marginalization of Bible prophecy. Those that believe we are now in the kingdom seem to have a propensity to ignore, marginalize, obfuscate, and even allegorize away, either in part or in full, important eschatological texts.

### **Building the Wrong Kingdom**

*Fifth*, Larkin notes that those involved today in kingdom building are actually not building God’s kingdom at all, but rather the kingdom of the Antichrist. Larkin explained, “When the Church enters into an ‘Alliance with the World,’ . . . the end of such an ‘Alliance’ will be a ‘Religious Political Regime’ that will pave the way for the revelation of Satan’s great ‘Religious Political Leader’ and ‘Superman’—the ANTICHRIST.”<sup>43</sup> According to the divine visions given to Daniel, only after the final kingdom of man (the revived Roman Empire of the Antichrist) has been terminated by Christ, will the Davidic kingdom be established on earth (Dan. 2:34–35, 43–45; 7:23–27).<sup>44</sup> Thus, the next kingdom on the horizon is not the kingdom of God but rather the Antichrist’s kingdom. Only after the Antichrist’s evil kingdom is personally overthrown by Christ will

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<sup>39</sup> Darrell L. Bock, “Summary Essay,” in *Three Views on the Millennium*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 304.

<sup>40</sup> Darrell Bock; quoted in Ken Sidey, “For the Love of Zion,” *Christianity Today*, 9 March 1992, 50.

<sup>41</sup> Craig A. Blaising, “Dispensations in Biblical Theology,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), 123.

<sup>42</sup> Bruce Waltke, “A Response,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Craig A. Blaising (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 356.

<sup>43</sup> Larkin, *The Second Coming of Christ*, 51.

<sup>44</sup> See chapter 5.



the Messianic kingdom become an earthly reality. This basic divinely revealed chronology logically teaches that those involved in kingdom building in the present Church Age are not contributing to God's kingdom since God's kingdom can only come after the Antichrist's kingdom has been abolished by God. Rather, they are helping build the next kingdom on the prophetic horizon, which is the Antichrist's kingdom! Dave Hunt articulates this very point:

There are many factors that make up the growing apostasy and seduction of the church. One of the most alarming, least understood, and fastest spreading errors is the teaching that earth instead of heaven is the ultimate home for the church, and that her goal is to take over the world and establish the kingdom of God. Only then, it is said, can Christ return—not, however, to take us to His Father's house as He promised His disciples in John 14, but to reign over the Kingdom which we have established for Him. . . . [I]f the real Jesus Christ is going to catch His bride up from earth to meet Him *in the air* (1 Thess. 4:17), then those who work to build a kingdom for a "Christ" whom they will meet with their feet planted on earth have been under heavy delusion indeed! They have been working for the Antichrist!<sup>45</sup>

Ideas have consequences. "Kingdom now" theology has a negative impact upon one's view of ecclesiology or the doctrine of the church. Viewing the church as the kingdom shifts the focus of the church beyond God's intended design. As this happens, the church will lose its purpose and thus forfeit its power. As well noted by Clarence Larkin nearly a century ago, if "kingdom now" theology should get the upper hand in the church, it will confuse God's original purpose for the church in at least *five* fundamental ways. *First*, the church will no longer see itself as a mere pilgrim passing through Satan's domain. Rather, it will begin to view itself as being at home in the world. *Second*, the church will begin to embrace a holistic gospel that focuses upon altering societal structures rather than the salvation of souls. *Third*, the church will forge alliances with groups that do not share its core biblical convictions so as to foster the political alliance necessary in order to usher in a "kingdom now" agenda. *Fourth*, the church will also cease emphasizing Bible prophecy. *Fifth*, the church will involve itself in building Satan's kingdom rather than God's kingdom.

### **Charismania and Kingdom Now Theology**

Much of what we see on so-called "Christian" television bears little resemblance to the type of normative Christianity that most believers practice today both in our nation and world. Sadly, the spotlight is often placed upon the fringes of the Charismatic movement. Both Power Evangelism and the Prosperity Gospel

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<sup>45</sup> Dave Hunt, "Kingdom/Dominion Theology – Part 1" (February 1, 1987), accessed July 12, 2015, <https://www.theberean.org/content/kingdomdominion-theology-part-i>.

represent such fringe theologies. Yet, what most do not realize is how these theological constructs are ultimately rooted in kingdom now theology.

### Signs and Wonders

Beyond the aforementioned changes, there exists yet another area of monumental change in the life of the church that will be ushered in as the church embraces “kingdom now” theology. This area relates to the modern-day signs and wonders movement. There exists today within the body of Christ an intramural debate concerning the perpetuity of spiritual gifts. Cessationists maintain that the revelatory gifts (prophecy, knowledge, tongues, interpretation of tongues, etc.) and confirmatory gifts (miracles, healings, etc.) ceased with the closing of the New Testament canon at the conclusion of the first century while the edificatory gifts (teaching, mercy, giving, leadership, etc.) remain. Christians of the Charismatic and Pentecostal variety, on the other hand, remain firm in their conviction that all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the New Testament are fully functional and operational within the body of Christ today.

While I remain in the Cessationist camp, I continue to have a friendship with and appreciation for many of my brothers and sisters on the other side of this theological divide. My real point of contention here is against a type of hyper-Pentecostalism, which contends that signs and wonders are an absolute necessity in order to win someone to Christ. This approach is sometimes referred to as “power evangelism.” Such hyper-Pentecostalism places such an emphasis on the confirmatory and revelatory gifts as well as the necessity of accompanying signs and wonders that it transitions from being *an* issue to *the* central issue, thereby causing all other ecclesiastical issues to pale by way of comparison.

Although not all Pentecostals are “kingdom now” theologians, it is important to understand that the above described hyper-Pentecostalism is ultimately rooted in “kingdom now” theology. The reason for this nexus between the kingdom and signs and wonders is a simple one. The prophesied kingdom will be a time of unprecedented miracles, signs, and wonders. For example, of the future kingdom, Isaiah 35:5–6 predicts, “Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.” If the kingdom, a predicted time of unprecedented miracles, is now a present reality, then the present age should also be a time of unprecedented miracles. In fact, these miracles should be paramount as well as the centerpiece of all modern ministry activity. Such hyper-Pentecostalism can be found in the mentality and activities of the Vineyard movement. While not painting with too broad a brush since not all Vineyard leaders or members represent what could be classified as hyper-Pentecostalism, it is fair to say that a strong dose of hyper-Pentecostalism resides today within the Vineyard movement.

Interestingly, the late John Wimber, the movement’s founder, was heavily influenced by “kingdom now” theology. According to Wimber’s own concession, he derived much of his views of the kingdom from the writings of George Eldon Ladd. Ladd taught a view called “Historic Premillennialism.” Among other

things, the view stands for the proposition that the kingdom is “already but not yet.” While contending that some form of the earthly kingdom will ultimately come in the future millennial reign of Christ, the kingdom had also already been inaugurated in spiritual form in the present age. Ladd maintained that Jesus was currently seated and reigning on David’s Throne in heaven, orchestrating this present spiritual form of the kingdom. As mentioned earlier, not all Charismatics and Pentecostals accept “kingdom now” theology, but Wimber was a strong proponent of it. He was explicit in linking his belief in modern-day signs and wonders to a present manifestation of the kingdom. Note the following statement by Wimber in his book *Power Evangelism*.

I was already acquainted with George Eldon Ladd’s writings (he was a Fuller Theological Seminary professor), but it was not until I read his book *Jesus and the Kingdom* that I realized how his work on the kingdom formed a theological basis for power evangelism. As I read Dr. Ladd’s works, and then read afresh the gospel accounts, I became convinced that power evangelism was for today.<sup>46</sup>

The Vineyard embraces the present manifestation of the kingdom as part of its overarching ministry philosophy:

Commitment to the theology and practice of the *kingdom* of God is the *most fundamental core value* in the Vineyard. When the Vineyard talks about the *kingdom*, we are talking about the *kingdom* of God as a dynamic reality that is the future *reign of God breaking into the present* through the life and ministry of Jesus. We have been commissioned to proclaim the good news of the *kingdom* of God, bearing witness to the *already* and the not yet of the *kingdom* in words and deeds. This understanding of the *kingdom* of God is the *central* motif that gives both structure and definition to *all* of our theology. We view the *kingdom* of God as the *overarching and integrating theme* of the Bible (italics added).<sup>47</sup>

The more open someone becomes to “kingdom now” theology, the more he will naturally move in the direction of hyper-Charismatic and Pentecostal theology.

Progressive Dispensationalists have also embraced a similar “already but not yet” view of the kingdom. Interestingly, many Progressive Dispensationalists who have adopted an “already not yet” view of the kingdom have also moved gradually in the direction of Pentecostalism. For example, in a book examining the issue of the perpetuity of spiritual gifts entitled *Are Miraculous Gifts for*

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<sup>46</sup> John Wimber and Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism* (Bloomington, MN: Chosen, 2009), 19.

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.vineyardusa.org/site/about/vineyard-values/kingdom-of-god>

*Today?*, leading Progressive Dispensationalist Robert Saucy opened the door to Pentecostal Theology in a chapter entitled, “An Open But Cautious View.”<sup>48</sup> Other flirtations by Progressive Dispensationalists with charismatic theology can also be cited.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the nexus between the kingdom now theology and modern-day signs and wonders has caused Charles Ryrie to inquire how Progressive Dispensationalism and Cessationism are intellectually consistent and compatible. He asks:

Non-charismatic progressive dispensationalists have not faced the question as to why signs and wonders are not characteristic of the church if in fact Christ is already on David’s throne. During our Lord’s earthly life many signs validated His claim to be the promised Davidic king for Israel. Now that He is allegedly reigning as Davidic King (according to progressives), why are there not miraculous signs happening today in the “already” stage of his Davidic reign?<sup>50</sup>

In actuality, the present age cannot be characterized as the kingdom for the simple reason that the wide-scale signs and wonders predicted for the kingdom are not a present manifestation. While not disputing the fact that God can and frequently does intervene providentially and miraculously in His creation at times (Jas. 5:14–16), these random occurrences do not correspond to the widespread miracles that will come to the world once the kingdom arrives. Interestingly, although Paul performed many miraculous signs throughout His ministry (Acts 14:8–12; 20:7–12), the New Testament also testifies to a gradual waning of the miracles performed through Paul as his ministry was coming to a conclusion. In 2 Timothy, his final letter, he wrote, “but Trophimus I left sick at Miletus” (2 Tim. 4:20).

Church history also seems to testify of the cessation of certain New Testament gifts. Notice Chrysostom’s (A.D. 345–407) commentary on First Corinthians 12, which is a key chapter dealing with the gifts of the Holy Spirit:

This whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place. And why do they not happen now? Why look now, the cause too of the obscurity has produced us again another question: namely, why did they then happen, and now do so no more?<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Robert L. Saucy, “An Open but Cautious View,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today: Four Views*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 97–148.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, “The Uneasy Conscience of a Non-Charismatic Evangelical” (1994), accessed September 4, 2015,

<https://www.bible.org/article/uneasy-conscience-non-charismatic-evangelical>.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 177.

<sup>51</sup> Chrysostom, Homily 29 on First Corinthians.

<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/220129.htm>.

Notice also Augustine's (A.D. 354–430) remarks regarding the cessation of the sign gifts:

In the earliest times, the Holy Ghost fell upon them that believed: and they spoke with tongues, which they had not learned, as the Spirit gave them utterance. Acts 2:4 These were signs adapted to the time. For there behooved to be that betokening of the Holy Spirit in all tongues, to show that the Gospel of God was to run through all tongues over the whole earth. That thing was done for a betokening, and it passed away. . . . If then the witness of the presence of the Holy Ghost be not now given through these miracles, by what is it given, by what does one get to know that he has received the Holy Ghost?<sup>52</sup>

If the cessation of certain gifts of the Spirit in the life of the church is indeed a reality, then the kingdom, a predicted era of miracles, cannot be confused with the present age. Yet, “kingdom now” theology alters this blueprint and in the process introduces hyper-Pentecostalism into the modern church.

### Prosperity Gospel

Yet another errant view also predominant in the modern church and on so-called “Christian” television is known as the “Prosperity Gospel.” According to this theological perspective, the believer, as the child of the king, is entitled to a life of health and wealth. Thus, if a believer finds himself or herself in a state of financial poverty or physical illness it is because they either do not have enough spiritual knowledge or faith to claim their biblical promises of health and wealth or they have not accessed the various divine verbal laws necessary to speak these realities into personal existence.<sup>53</sup> The Prosperity Gospel represents yet another theological error that finds its roots in “kingdom now” theology.

Like the connection to “power evangelism,” the relationship between the presence of the kingdom and the promise of health and wealth is easy to understand. The Bible notes that the kingdom will be a time of unprecedented healing (Isa. 35:5–6). In addition to universal healing, the kingdom will also epitomize an era of unprecedented material abundance. Amos 9:13–14 predicts that the “the plowman will overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; when the mountains will drip sweet wine. . . . My people . . . will also plant vineyards and drink their wine, and make gardens and eat their fruit.” Thus, if the kingdom is indeed a present, spiritual reality as maintained by “kingdom now” theologians, then inevitable healing and worldly riches should also be now

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<sup>52</sup> Augustine, Homily 6:10 on the First Epistle of John.  
<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/170206.htm>.

<sup>53</sup> For a book-length critique of the “Prosperity Gospel,” see Michael Horton, ed. *The Agony of Deceit: What Some Teachers Are Really Teaching* (Chicago: Moody, 1990).

accessible to every child of God. D. R. McConnell, in his critique of the Prosperity Gospel, well explains the dependency of this false teaching upon “kingdom now” theology.

The Faith teachers deny that the kingdom of God is in the process of realization, claiming that it is present in the earth to the point that believers can be delivered from all sin, sickness, and poverty of the devil. They . . . claim that the believer has absolute authority to conquer and eradicate these forces of evil completely from his life. The only process of realization is in the faith of the believer, not in the presence of God’s kingdom. In the jargon of biblical theology, the Faith interpretation of the kingdom of God could be labeled as a “hyper-realized” eschatology. The Faith eschatology is “hyper realized” because of its extreme promises to the believer of a life which is absolutely invulnerable to any type of evil. It claims “that the powers of the age to come” have completely come in this life and that these powers can be used at will by the believer with enough faith and knowledge of how to operate them. There is no process of realization of God’s kingdom in Faith eschatology; the kingdom can be completely realized in the lives of those who exercise Faith principles. We see this hyper-realized eschatology in the Faith doctrines of healing, authority, prosperity, identification and deification. The over-realized nature of Faith eschatology emphasizes the “Now” of the kingdom of God. . . . The . . . “Not yet” mystery of the kingdom and its powers is distorted by the hyper-realized eschatology of the Faith movement.<sup>54</sup>

In actuality, the present age cannot be characterized as the kingdom since New Testament heroes, such as the Apostle Paul, did not enjoy lives of unlimited health and wealth. Paul suffered from frequent illnesses (Gal. 4:13) and learned to be content both in financial abundance and material scarcity (Phil. 4:12). Illness as well as poverty can be identified in other godly New Testament examples such as Timothy (1 Tim. 5:23), the Macedonians (2 Cor. 8:2–3), and the Church at Smyrna (Rev. 2:9). If poverty and illness can be a reality in the life of the Christian, then the kingdom, a predicted era of health and wealth, cannot be confused with the present age. Yet, “kingdom now” theology alters this blueprint and in the process introduces the false theology of the Prosperity Gospel into the modern church. In sum, kingdom now theology has a tremendous impact upon the life of the church. Power Evangelism and Prosperity Gospel are the natural outworking of a belief system that conveys the idea that the kingdom has already begun.

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<sup>54</sup> D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: A Bold and Revealing Look at the Historical Basis of the Word of Faith Movement*, Updated and electronic ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011), loc. 4813–4846.

## Anti-Israelism and Kingdom Now Theology

A final critical area of ecclesiastical change as a consequence of embracing “kingdom now” theology pertains to the advent of anti-Israelism within the church. When the church views itself as the kingdom of God on the earth, it has a tendency to become either apathetic about or even belligerent toward the notion that God will one day establish His future kingdom upon the earth through His work with the nation of Israel. After all, why be concerned about a future kingdom that will come to the earth through the Jew if we are in a spiritual form of the kingdom now and the church has become the new, spiritual Israel? Alva J. McClain notes, “The confusion of our . . . Lord’s rule . . . leads to serious consequences. . . . [I]t makes the present age the period of the Mediatorial Kingdom. . . . [I]t dissolves the divinely covenanted purpose in the nation of Israel.”<sup>55</sup>

### Dominionism

Thus, it comes as no surprise to discover that the teachings of “kingdom now” theologians are replete with anti-Israel sentiments not only against God’s future work through Israel but also toward His precursor to this work as represented by the existence of the modern state of Israel. For example, Gary DeMar expresses such “kingdom now” sentiments when he says, “God has not called us to forsake the earth, but *to impress heaven’s pattern on earth.*”<sup>56</sup> He similarly notes, “Christians must be obedient to the mandate God has given to extend His kingdom to every sphere of life, to every corner of the globe (Gen. 1:26–28; Matt. 28:18–20).” Yet just as clear, or perhaps even clearer, than his “kingdom now” theology is DeMar’s anti-Israel mentality, when he proclaims:

Where is this “super sign” found in the Bible? Not in the New Testament. There is not a single verse in the entire New Testament that says anything about Israel becoming a nation again. Nothing prophetic in the New Testament depends on Israel becoming a nation again. If Israel becoming a nation again is such “a significant sign,” then why doesn’t the New Testament specifically mention it?<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God as Set Forth in the Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 438.

<sup>56</sup> The following quotes (and sourcing) from various “kingdom now” theologians, such as Gary DeMar and Gary North, can be found in H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1988), 409–11.

<sup>57</sup> Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of the Left Behind Theology* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2001), 203.

We find this identical pattern in the teachings of “kingdom now” theologian Gary North. North notes, “The goal of establishing Christ’s international kingdom can be presented to citizens of any nation.” Elsewhere North observes, “Christians are required to become active in the building God’s visible kingdom.” He similarly explains, “If the Christian church fails to build the visible kingdom by means of biblical law and the power of the gospel, despite the resurrection of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit, then what kind of religion are we preaching?” North also teaches, “The parable (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43) refers to the building of the kingdom of God, not simply to the institutional church.” As is the case with Gary DeMar, the anti-Israel sentiment is just as clear in the teachings of Gary North as is his “kingdom now” belief system. Thomas Ice reports, “Gary North has boasted that he has a book already in his computer for when ‘Israel gets pushed into the sea, or converted to Christ.’”<sup>58</sup>

### Progressive Dispensationalism

One also notes a similar, yet less severe form of marginalization of Israel’s end time role, in the writings of Progressive Dispensationalists, who believe that the church represents an “already” from of the anticipated Davidic Kingdom. The Progressive Dispensational marginalization of Israel is seen in the way the system refers to the church as the “new Israel.”<sup>59</sup> Of this designation, normative dispensationalist Stanley Toussaint appropriately comments, “This is precariously close to replacement theology.”<sup>60</sup> The New Testament never refers to the church as “Israel.”<sup>61</sup> Progressive Dispensationalism is also tentative in demonstrating political support for or attaching prophetic significance to the modern state of Israel.<sup>62</sup> By contrast, normative dispensationalists have traditionally seen the modern state of Israel as setting the stage for the fulfillment of end time prophecy.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Personal letter from Gary North to Peter Lalonde, April 30, 1987 on file; cited in Thomas Ice, “Answering Those Who Oppose Israel,” 1, accessed October 21, 2015, <http://www.pre-trib.org>.

<sup>59</sup> David L. Turner, “The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1–22:5: Consummation of a Biblical Continuum,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 288.

<sup>60</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, “Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist,” in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 259.

<sup>61</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Tustin: Ariel Ministries, 1994), 684–90; S. Lewis Johnson, “Paul and the ‘Israel of God.’ An Exegetical and Eschatological Case-Study,” in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 181–96.

<sup>62</sup> Craig Blaising, “Theological and Ministerial Issues in Progressive Dispensationalism,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Craig A. Blaising (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), 296.

<sup>63</sup> John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 26.



Progressive Dispensationalism also diminishes Israel's millennial distinctiveness and preeminence. Progressive Dispensationalist Darrell Bock is careful to express his belief in a future for Israel.<sup>64</sup> He is also quick to distance himself from Historic Premillennialism espoused by George Ladd. He claims that Progressive Dispensationalism allows for a future for national Israel.<sup>65</sup> However, a perusal of the writings of progressive dispensationalists demonstrates a significant diminishment of Israel's future role. For example, Bock refers to Israel's status in the millennium as merely being "in the midst of the nations."<sup>66</sup> He writes, "This approach, known as premillennialism, sees *a hope* for national Israel (as well as for the nations), with Christ functioning as Israel's messiah in the future kingdom program" (italics added).<sup>67</sup> He observes, "What God has started in bringing Jews and Gentiles together, he will complete one day for both groups."<sup>68</sup> Statements of this nature seem to imply not only a denial of Israel's millennial preeminence but also an erasure of all Jew-Gentile distinctions during the millennium. Craig Blaising similarly contends:

A Jew who becomes a Christian today does not lose his or her special relationship to Israel's future promises. Jewish Christians will join the Old Testament remnant of faith in the inheritance of Israel. Gentile Christians will be joined by saved Gentiles of earlier dispensations. All together, Jews and Gentiles will share the same blessings of the Spirit, as testified to by the relationship of Jew and Gentile in the church of this dispensation. The result will be that all peoples will be reconciled in peace, their ethnic and national differences being no cause for hostility. Earlier forms of dispensationalism, for all their emphasis on a future for Israel, excluded Jewish Christians from that future, postulating the church as a different people-group from Israel and the Gentiles.<sup>69</sup>

To this interpretation, Robert Thomas responds:

These words apparently advocate an equality by which all the redeemed share equality in the same kingdom roles, with no distinction between Israel and the body of Christ. This would mean that Israel will no longer be a special people and special recipients of the Old Testament promises made to them. Progressive

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<sup>64</sup> Darrell Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 589.

<sup>65</sup> Darrell Bock, "Current Messianic Activity and Old Testament Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and Old Testament Fulfillment," *Trinity Journal* 15, no. 1 (1994): 69–70.

<sup>66</sup> Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels*, 589.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 590.

<sup>69</sup> Craig Blaising, "The Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), 49–50.

Dispensationalism broadens the promises to Israel to include those outside Israel and, in so doing, neglects the ongoing uniqueness of Abraham's descendants in God's plan. . . . that is, a sort of demotion of national Israel. The progressive system subordinates that role by making non-Israelites recipients of the same promises that God gave to Israel—that is, a sort of promotion for non-Israelite believers. The result of both is the same. National Israel is no longer the special people of God. Needless to say, that representation of Israel's future role (or lack of it) results from a spiritualizing of the text, not only of 20:1–10 and the rest of the book, but also much of the Old and New Testaments. Dispensationalism retains Israel's unique position at the forefront during the millennial kingdom because that is the position that grammatical–historical interpretation gives her.<sup>70</sup>

Any denial of Israel's millennial preeminence conflicts with the numerous passages predicting Israel's supremacy over the nations and the Gentiles in the millennium (Deut. 28:13; Isa. 2:2–3; 14:1–2; 49:22–23; 61:5–6; Zech. 8:23; 14:17; Rev. 20:9). While Bock repeatedly refers to “a hope” and “a role for” national Israel, perhaps more appropriate biblical terminology would be “the hope” and “the role.”<sup>71</sup> Paul indicates that the hope for the entire world rests upon national Israel's response to the gospel (Rom. 11:12, 15). This disturbing pattern makes it quite apparent that the church runs the risk of becoming progressively more anti-Israel, both in its sentiment toward a future kingdom through Israel as well as toward the modern state of Israel, the further she experiences an ecclesiastical drift into “kingdom now” theology.

### Learning from History

This trend toward anti-Israelism within the church must be carefully monitored. After all, history tells us that today's Christian apathy concerning the Jewish people can lead to tomorrow's outright anti-Semitism. Sadly, much of the church's leadership throughout her two-thousand years of existence has been populated by those exhibiting hostility toward the Jewish people.<sup>72</sup> After all, it was the respected and revered church reformer Martin Luther who late in his life wrote a nearly eighty-page tract against the Jewish people entitled, *The Jews and Their Lies* containing numerous anti-Semitic rants, such as the following excerpt:

First, their synagogues should be set on fire. . . . Secondly, their homes should likewise be broken down and destroyed. . . . Thirdly,

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<sup>70</sup> Robert L. Thomas, “A Classical Dispensationalist View of Revelation,” in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 208.

<sup>71</sup> Bock, *Jesus According to Scripture: Restoring the Portrait from the Gospels*, 589.

<sup>72</sup> Michael L. Brown, *Our Hands Are Stained with Blood: The Tragic Story of the “Church” and the Jewish People* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1992).

they should be deprived of their prayer books and Talmuds. . . . Fourthly, their rabbis must be forbidden under threat of death to teach any more. . . . Fifthly, passport and traveling privileges should be absolutely forbidden to the Jews. . . . Sixthly, they ought to be stopped from usury (charging interest on loans. . . . Seventhly, let the young and strong Jews and Jewesses be given the flail, the ax, the hoe, the spade, the distaff, and spindle, and let them earn their bread by the sweat of their noses. . . . We ought to drive the rascally lazy bones out of our system. . . . Therefore away with them. . . . To sum up, dear princes and nobles who have Jews in your domains, if this advice of mine does not suit you, then find a better one so that you and we may all be free of this insufferable devilish burden—the Jews.<sup>73</sup>

Of course, the great bulwark against such Christian anti-Semitism is the belief that God intends to fulfill His kingdom purposes through the Jewish people. Yet, this theological defense is marginalized to the extent that it is believed that the kingdom is now. Lest the church return to its historical pattern of anti-Semitism, God's future kingdom program in and through the Jewish people must be vigorously defended and asserted. All things considered, "kingdom now" theology has a deleterious impact on the perspective, purpose, mission, and life of the church in very real, tangible, and practical ways.

### Conclusion

This work noted the trend of equating God's present work in the church with the messianic kingdom is a matter believers should be concerned about since this theology radically alters God's design for the church. As the church becomes increasingly intoxicated with Kingdom Now Theology, we can simultaneously expect the church to become increasingly confused concerning her pilgrim identity and more open to a Social Gospel interpretation of the Great Commission. The church will also move in more of an ecumenical direction, marginalize prophetic truth, and fail to see that it is actually involved in building the kingdom of the Antichrist. Forays into Power Evangelism, the Prosperity Gospel, and anti-Israelism will also be among the fall-out of the church's embracement of Kingdom Now Theology. My hope and prayer is that God will use this work, and other like-minded resources, to strengthen God's people to stand against the pernicious tide of "kingdom now" theology that is so prevalent not only in history but also in our own day.

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<sup>73</sup> Martin Luther, *Concerning the Jews and Their Lies*; cited in Michael L. Brown, *Our Hands Are Stained with Blood: The Tragic Story of the "Church" and the Jewish People* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1992), 14–15. For Luther's complete tract, see Martin Luther, *The Jews and Their Lies* (1852; reprint, York, SC: Liberty Bell, 2004).