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Dispensationalism and the Salvation of the Kingdom

by Robert Saucy

The dispensationalist emphasis on the distinct economies within salvation history frequently raises the issue of the nature of the dispensational understanding of present salvation. Within this broad question are the sub-questions of the application of the teaching of Jesus and the relation of God's present work to the kingdom. Of particular import with regard to the last issue is the contemporary discussion of the nature of salvation today. Does it involve primarily the vertical reconciliation of humanity with God through personal regeneration or equally, and even primarily, the horizontal reconciliation of people with people through the regeneration of the social and political structures of culture?

Before focusing on the broad question of the nature of salvation, it will be well to consider the present applicability of Christ's teaching, in particular the Sermon on the Mount, as this is frequently tied in to the question of the nature of the salvation proclaimed by the church. As noted in our previous article, dispensationalists today vary in their understanding of the relation of the kingdom of Christ to this age. Since Jesus' teaching is explicitly related to the kingdom, the nature of its applicability also varies among dispensationalists. Dispensationalism has always sought to follow the hermeneutical principle which takes seriously the context of any teaching. With the recognition that Jesus' earthly ministry was within the time of the economy of law (Gal. 4:4), and the sermon itself was taught in the context of the proclamation of the kingdom of God to the twelve tribes of Israel only, early dispensationalists tended to understand the sermon within the context of the anticipated Messianic kingdom. This kingdom, according to the Old Testament and even the announcements surrounding the coming of Jesus (cf. Luke 1:32-33, 68-74), included political overtones both for Israel and the Gentiles as well as spiritual salvation. With the rejection of Christ, traditional dispensationalism saw the establishment of this kingdom postponed until the coming of Christ in glory. Within this framework it was natural to interpret the early teaching of Jesus as having its primary application for life in the impending kingdom and only a secondary application for the believer during this interim period, similar to many teachings of the Old Covenant economy which are not literally applied today. Without question the earlier strong dichotomy between the dispensations of law and grace also contributed to the denial of the sermon's direct application for today. Because the mood of Jesus' instruction was imperative without mention of the gracious saving work of Christ or the enabling power of the Spirit, it was easy to contrast this with the later teachings of the apostles after Calvary and Pentecost.

Although there are many dispensationalists today who yet hesitate to see the primary interpretation of the sermon's teaching for the church, there are few who would argue for a strict kingdom interpretation. They recognize that the setting of the disciple's life is yet in a hostile world (cf. Matt. 5:10-12). Some therefore see its immediate interpretation for that time when it was spoken by the Lord before the rejection by Israel was final and the "mysteries" of the kingdom revealed a new era (cf. Matt. 13). This, of course, does not mean that Jesus' words have no meaning for the contemporary believer any more than some Old Testament teachings which are not interpreted directly for us at this point in salvation history, but yet convey a Word of God to us by way of application.

Many dispensationalists today, as noted in the previous article, no longer understand the fulfillment of the Messianic kingdom announced by Jesus as postponed entirely until the second advent.

They understand the spiritual salvation of the kingdom as available now through the work of Christ at Calvary. Since the sermon relates fundamentally to the personal life of the disciple of the kingdom in a world that has not yet become the kingdom of Christ overtly, this dispensational understanding accepts the teaching of Jesus as directly applicable to the believer today in the church. It is difficult to say how much of contemporary dispensationalism holds this position, although it would seem that the number is considerable and growing, providing a convergence with non-dispensational teaching at this point.

The question of the nature of salvation today has occasionally brought the charge that dispensationalism fosters an other-worldly salvation which has little concern for the salvation or regeneration of the present socio-political structures.¹ Most dispensationalists will acknowledge some share with other conservative believers in an earlier minimizing of social concern stemming from a reaction to a liberal tendency to deny the priority of salvation as a vertical relationship with God in favor of a horizontal reconciliation between people through social and political change. It is significant to note, however, that even during this period conservatives including many dispensationalists were vitally involved in seeking to meet the this-worldly needs of the hungry and poor of society. Today, it would be safe to say that dispensationalists generally recognize and desire to express the truth that God demands love in deed as well as word.

Nevertheless, it is true that dispensationalists along with most conservatives understand salvation today as involving priority of personal spiritual regeneration. This is in contrast to the socio-political thrust of the World Council of Churches sponsored discussions on "Salvation Today" at Bangkok (1972-73). To a considerable extent the understanding of God's present plan of salvation does involve one's view of history. This point has been noted by the critics of dispensationalism who charge it with a pessimistic outlook which cuts the motivational nerve for social and cultural change. In other words, it produces a truncated theology of salvation.

Dispensationalists along with most conservatives understand salvation today as involving priority of personal spiritual regeneration.

Dispensationalism, indeed, does not hold out high hopes for the regeneration of the socio-political structures of this present time. But it is strongly premillennial in its prophetic outlook and therefore finally optimistic. It anticipates a time when justice and righteousness will prevail throughout the structures of society within history.

It is important to note that dispensationalism is not alone in a somewhat pessimistic outlook for the present. According to Berkouwer premillennialism generally "... has a very somber view of historical development."² Even the classic reformed amillennial theology of Louis Berkhof leaves one with the impression of darkening days of apostasy and tribulation as the end approaches rather than any transformation of culture.³

The understanding of salvation today must be set within the biblical

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¹ See for example Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), pp. 76-81.

² G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 297.

³ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941), pp. 696-703.

eschatological framework of the tension of the "already" and "not yet" of the kingdom of God. The question is, how does Scripture describe God's saving activity during this "already"/"not yet" period? That God's salvation is active and even progressive during this time is certainly affirmed. But how is this activity related to the overt structures of society? Do the Scriptures portray the salvation of the kingdom today primarily as transforming individual believers through personal regeneration? Or do they also see the gradual transformation of society through the implementation of the righteous principles of the kingdom? Despite the plea from many today for a political understanding of salvation, the scriptural teaching and human need evidence the truth of salvation as personal regeneration. But does it also include the societal dimension, and if so, what is anticipated?

In his discussion of the signs of the end, Anthony Hoekema, an amillennial writer, sets forth three broad areas of scriptural teachings: (1) signs evidencing the grace of God; (2) signs indicating opposition to God; (3) signs evidencing divine judgment.⁴ He correctly notes that while these signs will intensify toward the close of this present time, they are, in fact, characteristic of the entire period between Christ's first and second coming.⁵ In the category of signs evidencing the grace of God, Hoekema includes the proclamation of the gospel to all nations and the salvation of Israel. Those involved in the opposition to God include tribulation, apostasy and the anti-christ, while those indicative of divine judgment are wars, earthquakes, and famines. Except for a different understanding with regard to the salvation of Israel, the dispensationalist would agree with this analysis of biblical teaching.

It is instructive for the question of God's present saving activity to examine these biblical characteristics of this age. According to Hoekema, the grace of God is active in the proclamation of the gospel to all nations. The message of this gospel centers in the forgiveness of sin and the gift of life through the renewing of the Spirit. While this life carries ethical implications for living in the world, it is difficult to find in the message of the gospel any clear prediction of the renewal of the socio-political structures of society.

The signs involved in the opposition to God lend a positive teaching to this lack of evidence for the renewal of society. The apostasy of many who have professed the faith along with the persecution of believers by the society in which they live culminating in the antichrist who will operate through political structures appears to render little support for the teaching of a transformation of the basic human structures of this present age. The general picture one gets from the New Testament is a present age of weakness and suffering on the part of the church as far as the outward forms of this world are concerned. This will be followed by the co-reign with Christ in outward power and glory. Although the saving power of Christ's resurrection operates in the believing community today, it is basically operative through weakness which represents the life of the cross.

To argue that it is God's purpose to seek to transform political structures today into the structures of Christ's kingdom raises several interesting questions. Since the kingdom is nothing less than a theocracy, is it suggested that we should be working toward such a theocracy now? If so, what is the relation of church and state? Surely in the final kingdom of Christ there will be no distinction between them even as in the Old Testament kingdom of Israel. It is interesting

to note in passing that some Jewish scholars use the church's advocacy of the separation of church and state to prove that the church does not intend to fulfill the promises of the kingdom. The present discussion of salvation as political calls for clarification of this issue. Does the gradual transformation of the structures of society mean the gradual merger of church and state? More importantly, what is the biblical teaching on this issue? Is it God's will for the church to begin the process of Christ's rulership of the governmental structures or to witness to his saving grace in preparation for his future rulership? Perhaps the questions can be stated differently, or the above antithesis softened. In consideration of the biblical witness, however, it would appear that the primary weight lies with the meaning of God's saving activity today as the proclamation of the saving message of the cross and resurrection calling men and women to a relationship with God through Christ in preparation for Christ's coming rule of the socio-political structures of the world.

Although the saving power of Christ's resurrection operates in the believing community today, it is basically operative through weakness which represents the life of the cross.

This proclamation, however, is not without its societal ramifications. Nor is the activity of Christ's kingdom absent from the present age. The Scriptures make it plain that the principles of the kingdom should already be active in the lives of believers. We have tasted of the powers of the age to come (Heb. 6:5) and must already operate according to the principles of the kingdom with "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). In short, the church is called to witness to the presence of kingdom power both in actions to those outside, but especially within as a community of believers. Living by the power and in accord with the principles of the kingdom will have an impact upon the world. Some of society's structures can be bent more into conformity with God's will for human life. But in the light of scriptural teaching all of this outward change must finally be understood as in the service of witness to God's present saving activity in calling individuals to himself and to one another in the community of the church. This is also a witness to the kingship of Christ as individuals and the church recognize his lordship over them. But they yet live, according to the providence of God's plan of history, in the realm of Caesar, a realm which under the permissive lordship of Christ is destined to be the expression of increasing antichrist activity until Christ purposes to take over the realm at his coming.

⁴ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and The Future* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 137ff.
⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 130.

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