

The New Testament is steeped in eschatological perspectives. At a glance, they are somewhat polarizing. The coming kingdom of God is somehow already “here/at hand” and yet there is a coming “new heaven and new earth”. The difficulty is holding these revelations in tension with one another. By surveying the New Testament’s teaching, the concept of inaugurated eschatology, a kingdom “already and not yet”, begins to reconcile this tension, giving the Christian community both present confidence and future hope. Living “in between” the ages, the Christian community ushers in future realities in the here and now.

The King, the Kingdom, and the Kingdom Agenda in Suspense

The gospels often speak of eschatology in a framework of “the kingdom”. The figurehead of God’s kingdom is his anointed one, or Messiah. Anointing signified divinely appointed kingship. Over and over the gospels announce the nearness of the kingdom of God. Therefore, for the kingdom to be near, the king must surely be also.

The New Testament clearly identifies Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament’s Messianic prophecy. The Magi, eastern astronomers, clearly identify Jesus as this “king of the Jews” whom they wish to worship.¹ It is because the king has arrived that the kingdom has drawn near. Jesus is the foretold ruler and shepherd of Israel who will usher in God’s kingdom.²

Therefore, the locus of kingdom advancement is centered in the person, words, and mission of Jesus the king. This is important for eschatology because his life on earth and foretold return are keys to understand both his inauguration and coming consummation. In tracing Jesus’ life, teaching, and continued ministry through his followers, it becomes clear that the present is held in suspense, between a king’s inauguration and the total reclamation of his kingdom. An inaugurated eschatology points to tension between decision and judgment, between preliminary victory and consummated victory, between spiritual renewal and universal re-creation. Ultimately, living within this tension becomes the focus of ethics in the Christian community.

¹ Matthew 2:1-2

² Matthew 2:6

“Already” Decision and “Not Yet” Judgment

John the Baptist bursts onto the scene with this bold claim: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”³ His preaching suggests that the time of decision, the time of drawing lines, has come. This “now” eschatological perspective is colored by imagery of judgment, such as the cutting down of fruitless trees to be thrown into the fire and the winnowing of grain. The proximity of the kingdom suggests that “end time” decisions are at hand.

Jesus himself perpetuates this immediacy. In his parables, he picks up similar agricultural imagery to communicate the severity of the kingdom’s nearness. In his parable discourses, Jesus repeatedly demonstrates the reception of the kingdom, in hearing his words, determines the eschatological fate of the hearer.⁴ The drawing close of the kingdom has consequences for the end. Since the kingdom is at hand, the allegiance of the hearer must be revealed. Because the kingdom is here, because it is “already”, the lines are currently being drawn in the sand.

The difficulty in this is that the kingdom drawing near is not the moment of judgment but the moment of decision. The “already” proximity of the kingdom is balanced by the “not yet” Day of Judgment. Thus, we have the suspended reality of inaugurated eschatology in decision and judgment.

As for the “not yet” reality of pending judgment, the New Testament offers glimpses at this coming day. Jesus alludes to it using the parable of the sheep and goats.⁵ There will be a coming day of separation. Ultimately this judgment is bound up in the reception of the king’s ambassadors, and thus the king himself. Again, all is focused on the person of Jesus. He is the judge and will judge all in the end.⁶

³ Matthew 3:1-12

⁴ Mark 4:1-34

⁵ Matthew 25:31-46

⁶ John 5:19-30

Paul reinforces Jesus as the judge of the end times, reminding his readers that all will stand and give account of their lives.⁷ Obviously this courtroom scene is set in the future, in the “not yet”. James puts more suspense in the same concept: “the Judge is standing at the door”.⁸ The same kind of immediacy of the “already” (the decision of allegiance) colors the pending “not yet” judgment” (the final judgment). The king and his kingdom are even now pressing in, terrific and inevitable.

Observe the immediacy of both decision and judgment. With biblical eschatology is held in such suspense, the Christian community must be centered in Christ’s mission: to announce the kingdom. The ethical implications point toward a missional community.

“Already” Victory and “Not Yet” Victory

Not only is the kingdom coming in the person of Christ, revealing and cementing allegiances, but also, the New Testament’s eschatological view on victory reveals another great tension. The New Testament reveals simultaneously that Christ has achieved victory, yet has not consummated his full reign.

After Jesus sends out his disciples to announce the coming of the kingdom and gathers them back, he says this profound statement, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven”.⁹ The dethroning of the enemy happened during Jesus’ lifetime! And furthermore, it appears to have something to do with the message of the kingdom going out, the word of God being transmitted, and the good news of the kingdom come being proclaimed. Though this profound statement by Jesus gives us great evidence of the “already” victory of the inbreaking kingdom, the New Testament points firmly to a particular moment as the locus of that victory.

Ultimately, the most prominent and confounding victory is the cross. “And having disarmed the powers and the authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the

⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:10

⁸ James 5:9

⁹ Luke 10:18

cross”.¹⁰ In the striking reversal of expectations, a king’s self-sacrifice becomes the moment of his inauguration, the moment of his victory. He is crowned, robed in purple, and lifted up for all to see as king.¹¹ The New Testament recasts victory as this self-sacrifice. Victory over sin, death, and the powers of this world have been won in the cross by Jesus, the all-atoning sacrifice.

Not surprisingly, this becomes the imagery of victory in the “already” kingdom. On this side of the eschatological tension, our victory takes the shape of Christ’s victory: persecution. Paul mocks the Corinthians for misinterpreting Christ’s victory, reminding them that victory in this world puts Christians on a downward trajectory like that of Christ.¹² To the Philippians, he even goes so far as to suggest that “to live is Christ, to die is gain”.¹³ Proper eschatology sees the hope in self-sacrifice and the victory of death: the very footsteps of Christ. With the “already/not yet” paradox held in tension, victory is rebranded as self-giving love that births resurrection in solidarity with the inaugurated king, Jesus.

However, at the second coming, victory is made whole and glorious. Christ returns as an ostensible victor rather than a suffering servant. He appears on a white horse with a sword coming from his mouth followed by a heavenly army.¹⁴ He will return a victorious king, calling his loyal subjects out to meet him in the procession.¹⁵ The spiritual reality of Christ’s victory will be fully expressed. This is the consummation of his victory. And it becomes a source of hope for the faithful, the persecuted, and those still struggling with the resident forces of evil. If first coming is analogous to the D-Day invasion of Normandy, the second coming is analogous to V-Day, the beginning of eternal armistice.¹⁶

¹⁰ Colossians 2:15

¹¹ Mark 15:1-39

¹² 1 Corinthians 4:8-17

¹³ Philippians 1:21

¹⁴ Revelation 19:11-16

¹⁵ 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

¹⁶ William Barclay, “Jesus’ Message” (lecture, NT501, Charlotte, NC, January 29, 2016).

Though Jesus' inauguration signals the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God, thus the deposing of Satan and the trajectory toward total victory, the New Testament also teaches that the Enemy is still at large. Though he fights a losing battle, he still "prowls around like a roaring lion".¹⁷ The New Testament writers, however, like Jesus, remind us that we have power over him. The victory is ours to claim if we resist.¹⁸ So, in between these parallel victories, the initial inauguration at the cross and the coming consummation, we must live with Christ's blooming victory growing inside and around us, holding on to him in obedience and hope.

Observe the tension of advancing victory. For now, we are suspended between the realities of inaugurated eschatology in preliminary victory, celebrating the victory of the cross in discipleship, and consummated victory, faithfully being prepared for Christ's second coming. The Christian community must be one that celebrates victory in light of the cross and in hope of the return. The ethical implications point toward a sacrificial community.

"Already" Renewal and "Not Yet" Universal Re-Creation

In Christ and his mission, there is a revival of creation, an undoing of the curse, and a universal restoration. In Eden, we see the Fall corrupt the relationship between God and mankind, the relationships between humans, and the relationship between man and the earth.¹⁹ Jesus' inauguration signals the repair of these relationships.

Biblical eschatology announces the restoration of relationship. Through Christ humanity is reconciled to God.²⁰ The inbreaking kingdom, the very core of the good news, points toward this truth. Not only are humans reconciled to God, but we are actually re-created in Christ.²¹ This is the undoing of the Fall's effects on our relationship with God. The gathering at Pentecost elaborately displays the restoration of relationship between humans. Scattered peoples again spoke in one

¹⁷ 1 Peter 5:8

¹⁸ James 4:7

¹⁹ Genesis 3:1-24

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:18

²¹ 2 Corinthians 5:17

tongue, foreshadowing the undoing of Babel.²² The consequences of sin and division are suspended and human community centered on God blossoms in the Christian way. We are “already” reconciled, “already” a new creation, “already” one body in Christ. What then is left in tension with the “not yet”?

In a way, the Christian experience of eschatological suspense boils down to this tension between renewal and universal re-creation. Though we are a new creation, we are continuously being renewed and transformed.²³ This is what Christian discipleship is all about: the process of becoming more and more the new creation, the new community, forged in the image and person of Jesus Christ.

The full realization of the king’s universal re-creation is left to the end of time. There will be a new heaven and a new earth, when the “old order” passes away entirely.²⁴ The corruption of the Fall will be undone entirely in a recreation. Paul describes this in terms of childbirth.²⁵ It is painful, agonizing, but inevitable. This age will be finished, it will be born. And that is our source of hope in this tension. The eschatological tension is evidence of that which is being pulled into existence: a universal re-creation in Christ.

Observe the trajectory of biblical eschatology. Christ is reconciling “all things” to himself.²⁶ This reconciliation is relational, pulling back into proper relationship that which was broken by sin. The Christian community should be about this ministry: a ministry of reconciliation.²⁷ The ethical implications point toward a reconciliatory community.

The Community Ethics of Inaugurated Eschatology: Caution from Corinth

Inaugurated eschatology bears heavily on Christian ethics. Perhaps the best way to understand the importance of keeping the tension between a kingdom “already” and “not yet” is to

²² Acts 2:1-12

²³ Romans 12:2

²⁴ Revelation 21:1-4

²⁵ Romans 8:18-25

²⁶ Colossians 1:20

²⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:18

explore a case of imbalanced eschatology. In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, scholars see what may be an "over-realized eschatology".²⁸ The Corinthian Christians appeared to weigh the "already" aspects of kingdom-living disproportionately to the "not yet".

Bad eschatology destroys community. The characteristics of this kind of imbalanced eschatology include arrogance about wisdom, devaluing of the human body, over-fascination with spiritual gifts, and undervalued social commitments, all of which Paul denounces. Proper eschatology fortifies the ethics of community, promoting unity and concern for others. Over and over again, Paul points to the corrosion of community life. There are lawsuits, affairs, idol feasts, abuse of spiritual gifts, and abuse of sacraments in the Corinthian church. When focus is too heavily placed on what Christians receive as they accept Christ's inauguration, there is a tendency to assume that eschatological completion has redefined the present circumstances to their final state. Rather than living in the tension of a community being continually re-created, over-realized eschatology breeds the selfish notion of being a finished product. This undermines the goals of the current age, the painful process of birthing restoration. Like pressure creating diamonds from coal, biblical eschatology shows this tension between the "already" and the "not yet" as formative, a pilgrimage, a long obedience in the direction of the kingdom.

Self-Advancement or Self-Sacrifice

Paul speaks to this by balancing their eschatological perspective. He applies the proper hesitation to their over-realizing by applying the tension of the "not yet" reality. To their misunderstanding of wisdom, he reminds them that the secret wisdom of God has given us the "mind of Christ", that ultimately is foolish to the world.²⁹ Because the kingdom is not fully realized, the wisdom of Christ will appear foolish, undermining any notions of self-inflating purposes of Christian wisdom. Their arrogance had become so full that Paul even reports sarcastically that they

²⁸ William Barclay, "1 and 2 Corinthians" (lecture, NT501, Charlotte, NC, February 27, 2016).

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:26-2:16

had “become kings”.³⁰ The answer again becomes a reminder of the incompleteness of kingdom eschatology. Paul exhorts them to imitate him and thus Christ in downward mobility, becoming “scum of the earth”.³¹

Paul is keeping proper eschatological tension. Christ, the king of the coming kingdom was a suffering servant, exalted on a cross, not enthroned by the world, but rejected by it. This is because his kingdom is “already” and “not yet”. It is the “not yet” reality of the kingdom that the Corinthian Christians forgot. Biblical eschatology will always remind us that in this age, the age between inauguration and consummation, the Christian life will take on the contours of self-giving sacrifice. With this theology ingrained in the Christian experience, we will, as Watts so eloquently described, “pour contempt” on all our pride.³²

A biblical eschatology pushes us toward the eschatological king, the person of Jesus, taking on the shape of his earthly life in the present and his eternal life in the future. The application becomes something like: *Never neglect the present for the future*, for they are entwined in inaugurated eschatology. The eternal victory of Christ is a point on the horizon that informs our steps, a guarantee. Remember for the present, as mentioned above, that victory is held in suspense, showing itself spiritually but not yet outwardly. The Christian life must take on the contours of victory on this side of eschatology, the cross-victory: humility. Eschatologically informed humility creates a Christ-centered community ethic.

Self-Indulgence/Self-Denial vs. Covenantal Self-Control

The Corinthian imbalance toward eschatology seems to have borne their other ethical misgivings. The devaluing of the human body led to licentious sexuality or denial of physical need.³³ The eschatological error is in suggesting that the current age does not affect the future one and

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 4:8

³¹ 1 Corinthians 4:13

³² Isaac Watts, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, Hymn, Howard Publishing Company, 1707.

³³ 1 Corinthians 5:1-6:40

therefore does not matter. The Corinthian Christians seem to have forgotten that in the “in-between age” we must not either deny our bodily needs or indulge their every whim; proper eschatology abhors asceticism and licentiousness alike.

Paul’s solution is to appeal again to Christ, the king of the coming age. Though there is freedom in the Christian life, he writes to remind us of the price of our sin, our unity with Christ, and the gift of covenantal sexuality.³⁴ Ethics in the kingdom “already and not yet” seeks to use freedom to honor Christ, to honor one another, and to honor covenantal relationships. Paul reminds, “This world in its present form is passing away”.³⁵ But for the present, he tells Christians to “honor God with your body”.³⁶ Affirming God’s design for sexuality in Eden, Paul supports marital sexuality as a gift to be consummated, not neglected.³⁷ Denying selfish sexuality as something of Satan’s, Paul rebukes the casual view of sexuality birthed by over-realized eschatology’s dualist approach to the body.

The New Testament shows that the “already” reality of Christian freedom expresses itself in Christ-like self-control within God-founded institutions of family in the “not yet” age of eschatological tension. Ultimately, the body matters because there is a bodily resurrection.³⁸ This is an eschatological assertion that Paul uses to correct a bad ethical perspective on the body.

Biblical eschatology pushes us toward the restoration of relationships in Christ. Re-creation takes on the contours of Eden, a place where covenantal relationship was not violated by neglect in any form. Again, *never neglect the now for the future*, for they are entwined in inaugurated eschatology. Remember, as mentioned above, the universal renewal of relationships is our trajectory and our present ethics must consider this horizon. Eschatologically informed self-control reinforces a Christ-centered community ethic.

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:12-7:7

³⁵ 1 Corinthians 7:31

³⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:20

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 6:16

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:1-34

The Community “In Between”

The great irony in inaugurated eschatology’s ethical implications is that the Christian community must live *now* for the *future*. Jesus’ own words on the matter are “Be on guard! Be alert!”³⁹ His words of immediate attention to the coming age express themselves practically through diligent obedience and faithfulness. Like the servants who invest their master’s talents of money, the Christian community must faithfully advance the cause of their king.⁴⁰

The cause of Christ is the kingdom of God, a kingdom of covenantal allegiance, total victory over evil, and restored relationships. The Christian community invests in this inevitability by living missionally, sacrificially, and conciliatorily. Held in tension between Christ’s inauguration and his coming consummation, the Christian community invests *now* in what *will be*, a process that can be as painful but as hopeful as childbirth. The kingdom agenda reforms and births the kingdom of God in the context of the Christian community, a community centered on the very king himself, Jesus Christ.

³⁹ Mark 13:33

⁴⁰ Matthew 25:14-30