

Ladd, George Eldon. *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdsman's Publishing Company, 1959. 144 pp. \$15.99.

Introduction

While teaching as a professor of New Testament exegesis and theology at Fuller Seminary, the late George Eldon Ladd authored *The Gospel of the Kingdom* in 1959. Ladd was a well respected author, theologian, and New Testament scholar. Some of his notable books include *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* and his magnum opus *A Theology of the New Testament*. Though Dr. Ladd passed away in 1982, his voice still speaks. Today at Fuller Seminary, George Eldon Ladd's name is immortalized on a New Testament department chair, while his theology is studied in a class at his alma mater. His New Testament theology text is a standard in seminary classrooms, and most close to home, his writings have greatly shaped the views of Dr. Russell Moore and his book *the Kingdom of Christ*, where Ladd is quoted at length.

Summary

Adapted from messages given outside the classroom, George Eldon Ladd's book seeks to develop a Kingdom theology as unveiled in Scripture and unfurled in history. In fact, Ladd lays out a very clear and concise vision of the kingdom of God as described in the Bible. Though only 140-pages, this book answers complex questions with Biblically satisfying exegesis and explanation. The full title of his book is *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God*, and accordingly this book contains a series of chapters each devoted to various topics along this theme of God's kingdom.

In Chapter 1, Ladd answers the question, “What is the kingdom of God?” After denying some of the common answers to that question, Ladd makes his case for understanding the kingdom of God as Christ’s rule upon the earth. It is Christ’s actions, not just his position; his governance, not just his rank. He says, “First of all, a kingdom is the authority to rule, the sovereignty of the king” (19). Drawing on Luke 19:11-12 and using Herod the Great as an example, Ladd explains that the kingdom of God has more to do with a reign than it does a realm (21-22).

Following this chapter of definition, Ladd introduces the already / not yet tension of the kingdom of God. In Chapter 2, he highlights the places in Scripture where the kingdom’s future presence is illuminated. While in Chapter 3, Ladd brings tension and balance to the kingdom’s existence by emphasizing its immediate presence on earth. Using the language of “ages,” Ladd teaches that there is a present evil age, and a forthcoming holy age (26-27). By birth we enter the former age, and by rebirth and resurrection we enter the age to come. While this present age is under the authority of sin, Satan, and death; the age to come will be under the providence of Christ, and this “hellish triumvirate” will be no more (45).

Chapter 4 is Ladd’s attempt at explaining the “mystery of the kingdom.” Employing Daniel 2 as a hermeneutical grid, Ladd expounds Matthew 13 and its parables of the kingdom of God to better understand the apparent mysteries of God’s kingdom on earth. The tension lies in the two-fold arrival of the kingdom. From the perspective of the Old Testament, a single event was going to usher in the kingdom. However, as Jesus explains and Ladd reaffirms is that there is an already / not yet tension concerning the kingdom’s presence and its forthcoming consummation. In other words, the coming of the kingdom has two stages of arrival, and not one climactic advent.

Chapters 5-7 continue this tension in the individual life of the believer. Thus far the scope of Ladd's lens has been on the corporate kingdom. Here the attention is turned to the individual and how he or she may enter the kingdom. He adequately proves that entrance into the kingdom and "eternal life" are synonymous technical terms in Chapter 5. In Chapter 6, Ladd delineates the stringent righteousness required to enter the kingdom. Using the Sermon on the Mount as a rubric, Ladd emphasizes the radical transformation of the believer resulting in things like forgiveness and unconditional love. He says, "As a new creature, the servant of God's rule will experience a real and evident measure of the righteousness of God's Kingdom in this evil age" (94). Finally in Chapter 7, Ladd demonstrates that a radical, costly, and eternal decision must be made for Christ in order to enter the kingdom of God. Thus as the titles of these chapters suggest, Ladd shows the life, the righteousness, and the demands of the kingdom.

Chapters 8 and 9 return to the corporate kingdom. This time the identity of the kingdom and the moment of its arrival are in question. After some discussion, concerning the former, Ladd writes, "The kingdom in its new manifestation was taken away from Israel and given to a new people. This new people is the church (114)." He says later, "There is therefore but one people of God" (117). With such statements, it would seem that he would dismiss ethnic Israel and enfold all of their promises into the church. However, it is clear that he sees a future for Israel in their return from apostasy to find blessing again in the same place as the gentiles. Using the language of Romans 11, he writes, "There is to be a greater turning to the Lord on the part of the Israel after the flesh, of such proportions that Paul can say that "all Israel"...will be saved" (119). Thus in Ladd's mind, the kingdom lies in the hands of the church, and Israel will some day have their blindness removed so that they may turn and see and come to Jesus.

This leads to the final chapter summary, and the close of the age. The final question that Ladd addresses is, “When will the kingdom come?” Wisely, Ladd gives a conditional answer, but one that he makes with strong exhortation to readers. Matthew 24:14 reads, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come.” Gleaning from this passage a message, a mission, and a motive, Ladd concludes his studies on the kingdom by calling the Christian to go into the nations and proclaim the gospel of the kingdom. The end has not yet come because the task of advancing the kingdom is not yet over. Conversely, when the gospel of the kingdom has been preached throughout the whole world, the end will come. This is Ladd’s simple and forceful conclusion, and one that ties up all his preceding theology into one strong push for evangelism until the arrival of the age to come ushered in by Christ’s return.

Critical Evaluation

Generally speaking, nothing but praise can be given to this book. Tackling a monumental and convoluted subject in Scripture, Ladd writes with great insight and brevity. His questions cut to the heart of the matter. His exegesis bears no unnecessary gristle. Rather, he writes so as to nourish the reader with strong meat and nutrient-rich grain. Moreover, Ladd’s outline allows him to address specific kingdom considerations without tangential wanderings. Likewise, his flow of thought keeps the readers attentive and longing for more. His book is incredibly devotional and inspiring, and will surely stir affections for the kingdom in many readers hearts, while safeguarding their minds from erroneous interpretations of the kingdom.

It must be noted, however, that this book is far from being a scholastic work. It includes very little research. It fails to address modern scholarship, and it does little to comment on the historical writings about the kingdom of God. It is evident that these chapters were

written not for the lecture stand, but for the pulpit. Consequently, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* is a brief sketch of an expansive subject. Its biblical content is rich and deep, but its breadth of study is not broad, and at best it hits the most pertinent questions concerning the kingdom of God.

Admittedly, Ladd never intended this work to be an academic project. These chapters were aimed at layman. They were aimed at the heart in order to edify and sanctify. Their goal was to inform men and women what the kingdom of God is and to motivate them to live radically for that already / not yet reality. Thus, it would be unfair to accuse Ladd of failing to attend to esoteric issues of scholarship and New Testament research. Just the opposite is true. His erudition is apparent even in these pastoral chapters. It is just a shame that Ladd did not have as much time to commit to this project as he did his theology of the New Testament.

The book's most helpful aspect may be its introductory nature to the kingdom of God. This would be an excellent first read for anyone desiring to know more about God's kingdom in Scripture. With its solidly biblical foundation, and without overwhelming the reader with technical jargon, Ladd's intelligent interaction with pertinent passages of Scripture dealing with the kingdom, along with his explanation of the kingdom helps tie together frequently misunderstood aspects of Kingdom theology. This book would serve anyone looking to begin to study "the gospel of the kingdom." It might best be described as an excellent biblical introduction.

More specifically, Ladd does a wonderful job demonstrating how the presence or absence of theology is lived out in the world. An example of this can be found as Ladd describes the unfolding plan of missions in the world while explaining the importance of the church (130-35). Beginning with a reflection on the great fallen civilizations of history, Ladd moves to the

present to declare boldly, “you and I are more important than the United Nations” (135). Ladd demonstrates here an ability to connect theology with real life. Though the world sweeps aside the church today, it is must be realized argues Ladd that the church is greater in God’s agenda and thus greater in the history of the world (134). So we should live like it.

Similarly, Ladd does a good job applying the lessons that he is teaching. For in the same chapter, he concludes with a call to missions and evangelism derived from the reality of the end of the age. Learning about the close of the age and the kingdom of God falls short, if we do not learn to live, love, and labor in the kingdom. This is just one example of Ladd following through on his theology and making it practical.

Conclusion

Overall, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* is intellectually stimulating and spiritually challenging. Its scope is wide enough to cover a host of important kingdom related issues, and narrow enough to avoid scaring the uninitiated reader from the subject. Ladd’s expertise is seen in his ability to edit out unnecessary discussions, and his pastor’s heart is evident in his ability to put hands and feet on his doctrine.

In short, Ladd’s book introduces the reader not only to precise theology, but also to a message that could, if applied, change lives, and this impact of changed lives is truly the power of the kingdom. Therefore, this book should be recommended as a book that helps elucidate the Scriptures and their life-changing message of the kingdom of God.