

Ladd, George Eldon. *The Presence of the Future*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdsman Publishing Company, 1974. 370 pp. \$20.00.

### **Introduction**

The late George Eldon Ladd was professor of New Testament exegesis and theology at Fuller Seminary. *The Presence of the Future* is his mature, scholarly attempt to explain the “already / not yet” tension of the present *and* future reality of the kingdom of God. Unlike his *Gospel of the Kingdom*, which simply meditated on various Scripture passages concerning the kingdom, *The Presence of the Future* interacts with and examines historical and modern scholarship. In this expansive edition, Ladd deftly sifts through such research pertaining to the kingdom of God in order to bring forward a synthesized understanding of the kingdom of God that could be described as inaugurated eschatology.

### **Summary and Evaluation**

According to Dr. Tom Schreiner in a class lecture on Pauline eschatology, it is impossible to understand eschatology, the Bible, ministry, or much of life without an understanding of the “already / not yet” tension found in the writings of the New Testament. This bold assertion would certainly find support in the writings of G. E. Ladd. For in every chapter, through various passages, themes, and ideas in the Bible, Ladd highlights this concept. The kingdom of God began with the person of Jesus Christ, but it has not yet come in its final and ultimate form. “God’s kingdom has come, but not to usher in a new age, but to work in an unexpected way within history” (145).

As Ladd begins his work, he cites countless theologians to demonstrate that the historical debate about the kingdom of God has always pinned a consistent, future eschatology against a spiritual, realized eschatology. Considering both sides, Ladd shows how the kingdom is not at either of these two extremes. Rather, the kingdom has come and yet is coming. He proposes to examine the Old Testament background on the kingdom of God, to explore the intertestamental writings of those awaiting the kingdom, and to consider the instructions of Jesus (42). Holding to his prospectus, he does just this.

Ladd systematically moves throughout these ages to show the promise of the kingdom, the fulfillment of the kingdom, and the future consummation of the kingdom. He writes:

The central thesis of this book is that the Kingdom of God is the redemptive reign of God dynamically active to establish his rule among men, and that this Kingdom, which will appear as an apocalyptic act at the end of the age, has already come into human history in the person and mission of Jesus to overcome evil, to deliver men from its power, and to bring them into the blessings of God's reign. [Therefore] the Kingdom of God involves two great moments: fulfillment within history, and consummation at the end of history (218).

This thesis Ladd proves over and over from Scripture, so that as he writes the theme almost becomes redundant. Yet, his repetition only reinforces its place in Scripture. As he writes about this technically advanced argument, two analogies served to help understand and explain this “already / not yet” tension.

The first analogy is that of the difference between a seed and a tree. In the person of Jesus Christ there is the seminal version of the kingdom. That is to say, that the kingdom of God has arrived in minuet. As Jesus says in Matthew 12:28, “If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” And again, with language that alludes to the work of God in third plague on Egypt (Ex. 8:19), Luke records Jesus words, “if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom has come upon you” (Luke 11:20). So it seems

that while the mature, fruit-bearing tree of the kingdom of God has not yet come. The kingdom, in seminal form, has come in the person of Jesus. This is in fact the picture given by Jesus in Mark 4:30-32 and Matthew 13:31-32, where the kingdom of God is compared to a mustard seed that is small today, but great tomorrow. Ladd comments on this parable to say, “that the Kingdom, which one day will be a great tree, is already present in the world in a tiny, insignificant form” (234).

This idea of a two-fold arrival of the kingdom is also illustrated in the relationship between engagement and marriage. Two-thousand years ago Christ made a pledge of betrothal to all those who would accept his invitation. Today, this offer of marriage is still valid to all who would accept Christ as husband. As a result, bridal language fills the Bible (see Matt. 24:1-14; John 3:29, 2 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 21:2ff). Christ is the husband and the church is the bride. Yet, this cosmic marriage is still future and not yet present. In the history of the world, the reality of this marriage is in promise only. However, there is coming a day when Christ will come for his bride to consummate this promise. This picture is seen in the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), where the groom is portrayed to return and take away the bridal party that is waiting for him. This is the second analogy helping disclose the “already / not yet” tension espoused in the Bible.

This idea of promise and fulfillment is what Ladd’s writes about most in his book. In fact, nine chapters are devoted to explaining how it is that Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament expectations. Ladd shows how Christ fulfills all the Old Testament promises, and yet how he also extended the fulfillment of some of these promises to his second coming. So, in other words Christ’s coming two thousand years ago inaugurated what will be consummated in

the future. The kingdom is present and future. Christ's kingdom grows as disciples are made who willfully submit to the rule of this Jewish king.

In the meantime, it is the role of the church to continue to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom. Ladd, speaks about this in the seventh chapter, "The Kingdom Present as the Divine Activity." Here, he very clearly lays out the person and plan of God to fill his kingdom with loyal servants. Ladd describes God as a seeking God, an inviting God, a fatherly God, and a judging God. From this nomenclature he shows from Scripture how God sent Jesus into the world to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). This can be seen most clearly in Luke 15, the parables of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son. Next, Ladd draws attention to God's universal invitation to attend his son's wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-14). Depending on the acceptance of this invitation God's fatherhood and judgment are unveiled. To those who receive the invitation and humbly come to the God who is seeking them, they are accepted and treated as fellow sons. However, if anyone refuses to accept the invitation, then they will encounter the terrible wrath of the Lord, the righteous judge.

These are not new notions, nor are they inventively retold. They are simple Sunday school truths. However, the way that Ladd unfolded this progression of seeking, inviting, loving, and judging very neatly showed the intrinsic relationships of these characteristics of God. It made kingdom growth very winsome and wise. Paul praised God for his unsearchable wisdom (Romans 11:33), and that was my sentiment as I pondered the utter simplicity and profundity of God's kingdom. As Ladd laid out these characteristics of God, he simultaneously told the gospel story interwoven in the composite nature of God.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this was a very technical book. Ladd waded through a lot of research before coming to his conclusions. This made for inconsistent reading. Some of the pages were filled with incredible insights, while others were mired by debate with German scholarship. Yet, in the process of wrestling with these theological heavyweights, Ladd earned credibility to promote his inaugurated eschatology.

While this book was technical, it was also enjoyable. Helping the reader interpret the Bible with greater clarity and coherence, this book reinforced a growing belief in my own heart that a Kingdom theology, with Christ at the center, is the most comprehensive understanding of the Bible. Moreover, it strengthened my understanding of an “already / not yet” eschatology, which has relevance not just for reading the Bible, but for living life. This book would not be the first Ladd book I would give to someone, but it would come highly recommended as a thorough treatment of the long debated subject, the kingdom of God.