

Chapter 8

The Radical New Era and the Priority of Jesus Christ

Tom Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ*

Quote of the Week:

*The lordship of Christ in these last days reaches beyond his ownership of Christians as his slaves. This is universal lordship. It demands that every person should hear him and obey him. There can be no exceptions among men or angels anywhere in the universe (Phil. 2:9-11). Jesus Christ, the Davidic king, is lord over all.*¹

Key Scripture:

“This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says:

‘The Lord said to my Lord,

“Sit at My right hand,

Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.””

Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ.” (Acts 2:32-36, NASB).

Lesson Outline:

- I. The New Covenant age is radically different because “the appearance of the Lord Jesus brings with it nothing less than the kingdom of God” (105).
 - A. God has always been king (see 1 Chron. 29:10-11, [Ps. 93:1-2]).
 - B. Yet when Jesus begins his public ministry, he says, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).
 - C. “In two very real senses, the kingdom of God had already appeared in the past” (106).
 1. First, God had already been perfectly sovereign over the whole universe.
 2. Second, the nation of Israel, headed by Davidic kings, was God’s kingdom on a localized scale (see Ps. 2 [in its original context—MDY], Acts 1:6).
 - D. Now Jesus’s coming transforms these two senses of God’s kingdom (Matt. 28:18).
 1. God’s absolute sovereignty over men and angels is administered through Christ.
 2. Jesus rules as Messiah, the Davidic king.
 3. Both strands of OT kingship unite in Christ in a way previously unimaginable.

¹ Tom Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2005), 113. Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are from *The Priority of Jesus Christ*.

- II. The New Covenant era is radically different because Jesus Christ brings perfect grace and truth (John 1:16-17).
- A. The prior era was characterized by law given by the hand of Moses; now we've entered a new era characterized by grace and truth brought by Christ.
 - B. "The Mosaic age was rich in both grace and truth" (107)—hence John's statement in v. 16 that we have received "grace for grace" (KJV), as "the grace that comes with Christ has replaced the grace of the Mosaic era" (107).
 - C. Yet v. 17 contrasts the law of Moses and the grace of Jesus.
 1. There was grace in God's giving of the Law, "but its measure of grace pales in comparison with what has become available with the appearance of Jesus Christ."²
 2. As someone has put it, "God sent the law, but brought grace" (108).
- III. The New Covenant era is radically different because of the coming of the Holy Spirit.
- A. With Christ's bringing of the New Covenant, the Spirit is active in ways he never was before (John 7:37-39).
 - B. The Spirit's arrival in Acts 2 marks a new era.
 1. The people redeemed by the Spirit are no longer a small remnant within one small nation. Instead, the Spirit sends out his word "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), so that "a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues" stands before God's throne (Rev. 7:9).
 2. The Spirit's work on individuals has changed. Where in the Old Testament the Spirit rested on a specific person to equip for a specific task, and then went away, in the New Covenant the Spirit indwells *every* member of the covenant, and that very indwelling *forms* the covenant community (1 Cor. 12:13).
 3. The Spirit breaks down ethnic barriers and reverses Babel (1 Pet. 2:9, Gal. 3:28).
- IV. This coming of the kingdom, this era of grace and truth, this coming of the Spirit, marks what the Old Testament called the last days, an era focused on Jesus Christ.
- A. "All that the OT spoke of occurring in the end times has begun in the first century and continues until the final coming of Christ...Paul says that the OT was written to instruct Christians about how to live in the end times, since upon them 'the ends of the ages have come' (1 Cor. 10:11)."³
 - B. The events of Pentecost and Peter's explanation show that this is the inauguration of the last days.
 1. "The activity of the Spirit characterizes this day as it does no previous day within the history of redemption...violent wind from heaven, tongues of fire, and a diversity of languages" (111, citing Acts 2:1-4).

² Frank Thielman, *The Law and the New Testament* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 105; quoted in Wells, 107.

³ G.K. Beale, "Eschatology," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), 331; quoted in Wells, 111.

2. Peter explains, countering both wonder and mockery (v. 5-13) by claiming that this marked the start of the last days, as proved by what the Spirit was doing (v. 14-21).
- C. Yet the Spirit isn't the focus—his work is to draw attention to Christ (v. 22-36).
1. Peter points to the life and death of Jesus (v. 22-23), and especially His resurrection (v. 24-32), as the background to this Jesus being not only David's heir, but God's appointed Messiah, the one who pours out God's Spirit (v. 33-36).
 2. Remember Heb. 1:2, which also links the coming of the New Covenant era with Jesus being the preeminent Lord and Christ.
 3. And both Acts 2:34-35 and Heb. 1:13 cite Psalm 110, [the most frequently cited Psalm in the NT—MDY]. "The unusually large number of passages in which this "sitting of Christ at the right hand of God" is expressed shows how great an importance the first Christians plainly ascribed to this faith...The simplest expression of the present Lordship of Christ is that formula 'Kyrios Christos,' 'Christ rules as Lord.' It was uttered in times of persecution before the pagan authorities, as well as in worship and exorcism."⁴
- D. Christ's kingship "brings with it a large step forward in the fulfillment of the mandate given to humankind at creation to subdue the earth (Gen. 1:28)" (113).
1. Fallen people have, by common grace, brought parts of the material world under control.
 2. But Christ rules over the entire universe (Phil. 2:9-11), turning Old Testament hope into New Testament reality.
 3. A new creation has been formed (2 Cor. 5:17, Gal. 6:15), with its inhabitants enabled to do everything that pleases our Father through Christ (Heb. 13:20-21).

V. The New Testament calls this radically new era of Jesus's reign a "mystery."

- A. [As used in the NT, a mystery is not something that no one understands, or that still needs to be figured out. —MDY]
- B. A mystery is something that has been a secret, that has not been fully revealed up to this point. Jesus spoke in parables because "to you [the disciples] it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted" (Matt. 13:10-11). Only Jesus gets to reveal this mystery, and he reveals it to some and not to others.
- C. The New Covenant era is God's revealing of things previously hidden (Rom. 16:25-27, Eph. 3:2-11; note the contrast of "now" in Rom. 16:26, Eph. 3:5, 3:10.).
- D. Even though the OT had spoken of God's plan of redemption, it was not fully spelled out. As Augustine put it, "The New was in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed" (quoted 115).
- E. It is the gospel events—Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension, [and enthronement—MDY] that reveal this plan in its entirety.
- F. In 1 Cor. 2:1-2, God's mystery is revealed as Paul preaches only the crucified Christ.
- G. In Colossians, Christ himself *is* the mystery (Col. 1:26-27, 2:2b-3).

⁴ Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950), 151, 153; quoted in Wells, 112-113.

VI. “To the writers of the New Testament, the New Covenant era and the priority of the Lord Jesus are two truths that belong together, each complementing the other” (117).

- A. Jesus died to establish the New Covenant (Luke 22:20), and so when we celebrate our participation in this New Covenant at the Lord’s table we think especially of Jesus (Luke 22:19).
- B. Paul considers himself a minister of the New Covenant (2 Cor. 3:6), and therefore a minister of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:5).
- C. Jesus is the better priest of a better covenant, relating to his covenant as the levitical priests did to the Mosaic Covenant (Heb. 8:6).

VII. Judaism also expects the coming of Messiah to bring vast changes and a new era.

- A. In Jesus’s day, Jews read the Old Testament with hope.
 - 1. It was, in part, a political hope (or a political fear—note Herod’s response to the prospect of Messiah, Matt. 2:4, 8, 12-13).
 - 2. But it was also a religious hope. The author of Psalms of Solomon⁵ expected that Messiah’s victory over political enemies would be followed by a purifying of his people: “He will gather a holy people whom he will lead in righteousness... There will be no unrighteousness among them in his days, for all shall be holy, and their king shall be the Lord Messiah.”⁶

B. That longing has only deepened in the centuries since:

The Rambam [a nickname for the 12th c. rabbi Maimonides] concludes the Mishnah Torah with a description of the Messianic age, when “the world will be filled with the knowledge of God, as the sea fills up the ocean bed.” Jewish thought explains that God rewards us “measure for measure.” Thus, to merit the revelation of Godly wisdom in the Messianic age, we must work to spread Godly wisdom in the present. May the publication of this text contribute to that great goal, and may we merit the coming of the era when “a man will no longer teach his neighbor... saying, ‘Know God,’ for they all shall know me” (Jeremiah 31:33) with the coming of the Mashiach [Messiah]. May it be speedily, in our days.⁷

C. In Jesus Christ we see the fulfillment of all of those hopes and more, as he has established his New Covenant.

⁵ A collection of writings dating to the first century B.C.; they are named for the biblical king, but were written about 800 years after his death.

⁶ In James Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 2:667; quoted 119.

⁷ Eliyahu Touger, translator, Maimonides, *Mishnah Torah* (New York: Moznaim Publishing, 1989), 10; quoted 119. [These may be some of the saddest words written, genuinely longing to earn and receive what Christ has already brought us. –MDY]