Genealogy of a Doctrine: How the Kingdom Became Now — The Short Version

Paper 9 in a 12 Part Series

by Escape the Mustard Tree

A plain-language companion to Paper 9. Everything here is worked out at length there, with the Greek, the objections, and the sources.

Where did this come from?

When people first hear Word of the Kingdom teaching, the first reaction usually comes before anyone opens a Bible: **this sounds new.** A real kingdom still to come. A Judgment Seat that decides who rules, not who gets in. A salvation that's secure in the spirit but still being worked out in the soul and body.

A genealogy answers one question: where did this come from? Ask it of a family's red hair and you trace it back through parents and grandparents until you find where it entered the line. This paper asks it of a doctrine — the belief, held by most churches today, that the kingdom is here now, in the church, and that the thousand years of Revelation 20 are not a future reign at all.

Trace that belief back and you find something surprising. **It is the newer idea.** The early church expected a coming kingdom. That expectation was set aside over a few centuries, by a handful of men, for reasons that can be named and dated.

The first assemblies

Start with the word. English Bibles say "church," but the Greek word is *ekklesia*, and it means an assembly — people called together. Luke uses the same word for a rioting crowd packed into the theater at Ephesus (Acts 19:32). It works like our word "meeting": a town hall is a meeting, and so is a mob. The word doesn't tell you which. The context does.

The New Testament assemblies met in houses. Each had several elders, not one man in charge, and "elder," "overseer," and "shepherd" were names for the same men (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). Over all of them stood one Chief Shepherd, and that was Jesus. Scripture was read aloud to everyone, and ordinary people checked even an apostle against it. Luke says the Bereans were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica,

> "in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." (Acts 17:11)

They audited Paul, and Luke praises them for it.

Keep two questions in view through the whole story: **who decides what is true**, and **how does an ordinary person get at Scripture?** In the first century the answers were simple. The apostles' word decided, and anyone could hear the text read and test it.

Then three changes came. Around 107–110, Ignatius of Antioch pressed for a single bishop over the elders. Around 180, Irenaeus answered the gnostics — teachers who claimed the apostles had passed down secret instruction — by naming the bishops of Rome in order, back to the apostles. Truth now ran through a line of men. By the mid-200s, Cyprian was describing the bishop as a priest, and in Alexandria the interpreting of Scripture had become a trained, scholarly discipline. **The answer to who decides was moving from the assembly to the office and the school.**

How the reading changed

For the first few centuries, Christians expected a literal kingdom after Jesus' return. Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian all taught a thousand-year reign. Tertullian put it in one line: "we do confess that a kingdom is promised to us upon the earth."

Then came **the method.** Educated Greeks had long been embarrassed by the behavior of Homer's gods, so they read those stories as symbols. The gods' quarrels became forces of nature or moral lessons, and the embarrassment went away. Philo of Alexandria did the same thing to Moses. Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–254) took that tool and turned it on the prophets. Promises of a coming kingdom became pictures of inward, spiritual things, and the thousand years dissolved into a symbol. Most of the Greek-speaking church followed him.

In the West, the decisive man was Augustine (354–430). And here's the surprise: he'd once believed in the coming kingdom himself. He lays out the old view fairly — six days of creation pointing to six thousand years, then a seventh-day rest of a thousand years — and then admits:

> "for I myself, too, once held this opinion." (*City of God* 20.7)

What turned him was a crude version some people taught, with feasts of meat and drink beyond belief. But the whole expectation went out with it. In its place he taught that the thousand years are happening now, and that the church is the kingdom:

> "The Church even now is the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of heaven." (*City of God* 20.9)

That sentence shaped the Western church for more than a thousand years.

He did not invent the method. He'd heard it from Ambrose of Milan, whose figurative preaching on the Old Testament helped bring him back to the church. And he took his reading of Revelation 20 largely from a North African writer named Tyconius, whom he recommended by name.

How it stuck

A new reading needs more than a gifted writer to become everyone's assumption. It needs a mechanism, and two emperors built one.

Constantine ended the persecution of Christians in 313, and in 325 he called the bishops of the empire to Nicaea to settle a question of doctrine — the first time a Roman ruler had done any such thing. Then in 380 Theodosius I issued a law ordering every people under his rule to hold one

approved faith. Those who complied could call themselves "Catholic Christians." Everyone else was declared a heretic, and their gatherings could not be called churches at all.

Remember the word *ekklesia*? Context used to decide which assembly was meant. **After 380, the law decided.**

From then on, doctrine was settled by councils and creeds, binding on everyone. Neither of the great councils of that century said a word about the millennium. They didn't need to. Once the habit of settled, official teaching was in place, Augustine's reading only had to become the default, and it did.

Over the next thousand years, the second question got harder to answer. The Western Bible was in Latin, which was a gift while people spoke Latin and a wall once they did not. Copying Scripture became the work of monks. Some councils forbade lay people to own it or translate it: Toulouse in 1229, Tarragona in 1234, England in 1408. No pope or general council ever banned Bible reading everywhere. Every one of these was local. But the men who put Scripture into ordinary hands paid for it. Wycliffe's bones were dug up and burned, and Jan Hus was burned alive.

So where was the coming-kingdom reading for a thousand years? **No hidden remnant is needed to explain the silence.** Reaching a different conclusion takes a man reading the text in his own language, free to disagree with his teachers, and able to say so without being killed. For most of those centuries, those three things rarely came together in one place.

The Reformation: half the job

The printing press and new translations changed that. Luther's German New Testament came out in 1522, Tyndale's English one in 1526, and an ordinary man could finally read Scripture for himself.

The Reformers used it to overhaul **how a person is saved.** Luther's justification by faith alone answered a whole system of indulgences and earned merit. That was a real recovery.

But they never reopened **the kingdom.** Picture a family that buys an old house, guts the kitchen down to the studs, and moves into every other room just as they found it. The Reformers rebuilt salvation and moved into Augustine's kingdom as they found it. The Augsburg Confession of 1530, the Church of England's Forty-Two Articles of 1553, and the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 all condemned millennial teaching in some form, and none of them stopped to work through Revelation 20.

John Calvin did answer it. He's famous for calling it "too puerile to need or to deserve refutation." Read his whole paragraph, though, and his real objection is that these teachers gave God's children only a thousand years of blessing and stopped there. That would make the saints' happiness come to an end, and Calvin said Scripture promises it never will.

He's right that it never ends. But that is not what this reading says. If your boss gives you a week's vacation, nobody thinks your life ends the following Sunday. **The thousand years are the seventh day of a week, not the sum of what lies ahead.** Calvin's reasons never touch that. And on what Revelation 20 actually means, he repeats Augustine's reading as if it were settled and moves on.

Luther, for his part, read Revelation as a map of church history and put the thousand years in the past, already over. He studied the book closely and never questioned Augustine's frame. **Salvation got re-examined. The kingdom did not.**

The nineteenth century: the other half, alone

Interest in a future kingdom revived in England in the 1600s and 1700s. Then in the 1830s John Nelson Darby built a full system around it: a literal future kingdom, a rapture of the church, and a series of distinct dispensations. Through the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), his view became the standard lens of American evangelicalism.

But Darby kept the Reformation's view of salvation, Calvinist through and through. So the kingdom's **timing** came back, but the difference between entering the kingdom and ruling in it did not. That's why so many Christians today expect a coming millennium and still treat "salvation," "eternal life," and "reward" as three names for one thing.

In the same decades, others recovered both halves together. Robert Govett published *Entrance into the Kingdom* in 1852: a real future kingdom, and a place in it given according to faithfulness. G. H. Pember, D. M. Panton, and G. H. Lang carried that line into the twentieth century, and it's still in print today. It never reached the mainstream.

Not a new belief

So the coming kingdom is not a modern invention. Three witnesses point the same way.

An unbroken line of writers. From Govett in the 1840s to authors publishing now, the teaching has a continuous paper trail of ordained ministers, seminary presidents, and scholars.

A second-century letter. The Epistle of Barnabas is not Scripture, but it was written within decades of the apostles, and it reads creation's week as a map of history:

> "in six days, that is, in six thousand years, all things will be finished." (Epistle of Barnabas 15)

Then, it says, the Son comes, the ungodly are judged, and the true seventh-day rest begins.

A living Jewish tradition. The Talmud records the same six-thousand-year shape of history (Sanhedrin 97a), and Jewish teachers still describe six millennia followed by a seventh, a cosmic Sabbath, entirely apart from any Christian influence.

Underneath all three is the principle Peter states:

> "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." (2 Pet. 3:8)

Peter wrote that to men who scoffed that Jesus' coming would never happen. It's his answer to them: the delay is not slackness, and the coming is still on its way.

The reward side is not new either. Around 180, Irenaeus taught that those who bear thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold will have different places among the saved, resting it on Jesus' words, "In My Father's house are many mansions" (John 14:2). He said he received it from "the presbyters,

the disciples of the apostles." Two centuries later Jerome wrote that God does not "assign equal rewards to unequal deserts."

What this is not

This is not a claim that the true church disappeared. Nothing here needs a secret remnant hiding through the Middle Ages. It needs only a doctrine that, for a very long time, nobody was free or willing to re-examine.

This is not an attack on the Reformers' gospel. Justification by faith alone was a real and needed recovery. They fixed one doctrine and carried the other forward untouched.

This is not "old means true." Age does not make a teaching right, and newness does not make it wrong. The test is still the Bereans' test: open the Scriptures and see whether these things are so. The history answers one charge only, that this reading was invented yesterday.

Why this matters

If you've been told the coming kingdom is a fringe idea dreamed up in the 1800s, the record says the reverse. The early church held it. Augustine held it before he let it go. The view most churches hold now came in through a borrowed method, settled into place under emperors and councils, and was handed down for well over a thousand years without anyone reopening the question.

What Word of the Kingdom theology teaches is not a new addition. It's two pieces put back together — **a real kingdom still to come**, and **a real reward for those found faithful** — that history pulled apart and Scripture never did.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.