

ARISE & BUILD

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IS THE KINGDOM PRESENT?

BY MARTIN G. SELBREDE



During Christ's lifetime, our Lord anticipated the question of the coming of the Kingdom several different ways, depending on His audience and the lesson He was bringing home to His listeners. It is one thing to observe that "the Kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it" (Luke 16:16). That tells us that the kingdom is growing without limitation. How do we know the Kingdom is advancing? Luke 17:20 seems to set forth Christ denying us the benefit of empirical evidence: "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation." Its growth, its coming, occurs as slowly as a mustard seed grows into the largest of trees—which is to say, too slow for one person to mark that progress with their own eyes.

Nonetheless, there are unmistakable markers that the Kingdom of God is present, and that His people are taking seriously the call to seek first His Kingdom and its righteousness (or justice). These clues are presented throughout the Scripture, and from them we can gain a picture of what the Kingdom "looks like" at various stages of its development.

The more attractive elements of that picture are well-known: every man under his own vine and fig tree (Micah 4:4, Zech. 3:10), "abundance of peace so long as the moon en-

dureth" (Psalm 72:7), the earth being filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9). The latter verse is interesting because it explains why "they shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain," which would then be another expectation for that future era.

The danger in rehearsing all these wonderful aspects of the world that is being shaped as the leaven slowly penetrates it is multifold. *First*, such victories of the gospel might appear afar off to us, which keeps us at a distance from their realization. In one sense, this is true: we almost certainly are stepping stones to those future generations. The danger is in losing sight of *our* generation's express contributions to the Kingdom and people's ability to see its manifestation in justice, mercy, and faith. *Second*, we fail to recognize that many of these markers are the *results* of God's Kingdom dynamically acting through His people. God doesn't just fling peace on the earth (Christ expressly denies this in Matt. 10:34), He commissions peacemakers as He speaks peace to the nations (Zech. 9:10). Christ sends us forth as ambassadors who are given the ministry of reconciliation because God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself (2 Cor. 5:17–20). That task, as Benjamin B. Warfield notes, is given to all believers to pursue. We too easily overlook our stake in the Kingdom's visibility in our day and age.

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THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE CRISIS OF ABUSE

When we encounter discussions of the Kingdom of God and the tsunami of abuse rampant in our era, we could be forgiven for thinking of that conjunction in terms of abusive Protestant pastors, abusive Roman Catholic priests, abusive cult leaders, abusive Christian parents, etc. In all these categories, it is noteworthy that believer and nonbeliever alike have come to perceive the visible church (however one defines it) as a particularly rich environment for every predatory behavior. The solutions usually offered as a defense against these enormities are tighter regulations, stiffer penalties, massive surveillance, and coercive measures all the way to outlawing religion altogether.

We tend not to be surprised at news stories about public school teacher unions opposing legislative bills that would make sex with students a crime, such as occurred in Rhode Island in April 2019.¹ It would merely be evidence of teachers being treated as a protected class, so far as we might be concerned. Maybe these secular bureaucrats learned the practice of “passing the trash”² (moving predators to other school districts to resume the abuse cycle) from practices within the big wide world of Christendom. These are all variations on the “circle the wagons” imperative to protect institutional reputations at the expense of the weak and vulnerable.

I’ve written at length on the topic of abuse for Chalcedon³ back in January, 2014, and by the time you read this I will have (God willing) delivered three lectures on that topic in Alabama. Some might find this topic an unusual one, an issue that appears to be peripheral to matters of the Kingdom. Dealing with abuse is seen by too many as a distraction (perhaps

a necessary one, but still a distraction) from primary Kingdom imperatives and missions.

The best justification most people see for treating abuse as a Kingdom matter is getting the abused back on their feet and back in the game, where the main action is. Too many of us have trouble seeing a Biblical approach to abuse as itself Kingdom-oriented and Kingdom-glorifying—perhaps even a matter at the heart of the Kingdom and how it comes without observation into our fallen world. And some of us would prefer “isolation instead of involvement”⁴ in the face of these difficult, messy matters ... to be raptured away from the ugly side of human interaction and the effects rippling outward from one ground zero after another.

THE DOUBLE WITNESS OF ISAIAH

Most Reconstructionists are more than familiar with the famous Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 42. And they will readily grant that the Messiah apparently deals very gently with the abused, the downtrodden, the victim of evil, as laid out in verse 3: “A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth.” This is quoted in Matt. 12:20 as well, where Christ modifies the final clause to assert that the Messiah shall send forth justice unto *victory*. Those last words are clearly important, and it is understandable for us to emphasize them. They *should* be emphasized, especially in light of the next verse in Isaiah that He shall set justice in the earth, and the Gentiles shall wait for His law.

But that third clause about victory should not be emphasized at the expense of the two clauses that precede it that concern the bruised reed and smoking flax. There’s something about

Christ's choice of building materials here that should catch our attention, precisely because *virtually any other king* wouldn't hesitate to break the bruised reed and quench the smoking flax. It's too much trouble to deal with damaged goods—for anyone, that is, except the Lord Christ, who sees treasures in what men lightly esteem, and vice versa (Luke 16:15).

Maybe you're thinking, Yes, Christ will not break bruised reeds, He is the lifter of the head. And that office now falls to pastors and elders and deacons and doctors and therapists. This has nothing to do with the average Christian, who needs to arise and build, just like the masthead of this publication says. At best, we need to bear one another's burdens and weep with those who weep, and do so genuinely, but we need to focus on Kingdom-building, not cooling our heels in the infirmity world without end.

It would be my contention that this mindset, aside from being inconsistent with the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, is also inconsistent with two other key pieces of Scripture. We're all familiar with the one, concerning the Good Samaritan who showed mercy to the man dying in the ditch. And we might even acknowledge that showing such mercy was an example of loving one's neighbor as oneself, and thus a fulfillment of God's justice as recorded in Leviticus 19:18.

But, you might reply, that certainly indicates what being a neighbor entails, and how to show love to one's neighbor, and how to do so in a law-honoring way, but neighborliness, even Biblical neighborliness, falls short of being a crucial Kingdom imperative. You'd need more evidence to show that ministering to those who are being harmed is a specific element of God's Kingdom and its administration in our day. Is there Scripture to that effect?

ISAIAH 32: THE KING, THE PRINCES, AND THE MAN

I want to draw your attention to the first couple of verses of Isaiah 32, which describes the Messianic era, the Kingdom of God. The first eight verses of this chapter are regarded as descriptive of the Kingdom, and there are fascinating details embedded in it (such as the explosion of all social lies described in verses 5 and 6, etc.—things that have yet to happen in our world, but will indeed happen).

Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness, and princes shall rule in judgment.

And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. (Isa. 32:1–2)

The king of verse one is supposed by some as Christ Jesus ruling from the right hand of heaven, but such vague, generic terms for Him would be out of place after Isaiah had previously given the Messiah such concrete, lively names in chapters 7, 9, and 11 and how the Hebrew places the emphasis (“for righteousness will a king rule ...”).⁵ The princes ruling in judgment are the earthly civil rulers applying God's law faithfully to every corner of their lands, fulfilling the command of 2 Sam. 23:3, “He who rules over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God.” These are things we would expect as His Kingdom extends over the world: a trickle-down of the King's imperatives into His creatures as they emulate Him.

But who is this generic “man” of verse two, this mysterious Everyman, who functions as a four-fold protector from wind, tempest, drought, and heat? What kind of hiding place is he? Should we think about the Hebrew midwives, Rahab of Jericho, Corrie Ten Boom's *The Hiding Place*, etc.? The

Pulpit Commentary on Isaiah 32:2 provides guidance here:

THE REFUGE WE MAY BE TO ONE ANOTHER. *Any man may be, and every man should seek to be, a hiding-place, a covert ... Who would not like so to live, with such quick and ready sympathy of spirit, with such kindness and helpfulness of word, with such friendliness of uplifting hand and sustaining arm, that his life should be suggestive of the words, "A man shall be a hiding-place"?*⁶

Here you see a proper yardstick to determine the extent to which the Kingdom is in our midst. It is a measure we have some influence over, by our actions and commitments, individually and collectively. Hiding places, coverts, rivulets, massive rocks are mentioned *because they are desperately needed by victims seeking refuge and succor* (the last clause of verse 2 is literally *a land of fainting*). Not surprisingly, George Adam Smith's commentary on Isaiah plumbs the depths of the passage the best:

When Isaiah says with such simplicity *a man*, he means any man, he means the ideal for every man. Having in ver. 1 laid down the foundation for social life, he tells us in ver. 2 what the shelter and fountain force of society are to be. "Character and the capacity to discriminate character" indeed summarizes this prophecy ... Isaiah's words present us, *first*, with a philosophy of history, at the heart of which there is, *secondly*, a great gospel, and in the application of which there is, *thirdly*, a great ideal and duty for ourselves.

Where the desert touches a river-valley or oasis, the sand is in a continual state of drift from the wind, and it is this drift which is the real cause of the barrenness ... plants often spring up through the sand, and there is sometimes promise of considerable fertility. It never lasts. Down comes the periodic drift, and life is stunted, or choked out. But set down a rock

on the sand, and see the difference its presence makes. After a few showers, to the leeward side of it some blades will spring up; if you have patience, you will see in time a garden. How has the boulder produced this? Simply by arresting the drift.

... A great man serves his generation, serves the whole human race, by arresting the drift.⁷

Smith says that all of Isaiah's countrymen "were rushing down the mad, steep ways of politics, carried off by the only powers that were as yet known in these ways," against which Isaiah had "stopped one of the most dangerous drifts in history."

Smith enumerates others who stood their ground to prove the prophet's point. "Isaiah is right. A single man has been as 'an hiding-place from the wind and a covert from the tempest.' History is swept by drifts: superstition, error, poisonous custom, dust-laden controversy." What is needed is for a man "to resist those drifts, to set his will, strong through faith, against the prevailing tendency, and be the shelter of the weak."⁸

THE THREE PHASES OF THE KINGDOM IN ISAIAH 32:1-8

Smith laid down the elements of Isaiah's prophecy clearly: justice and righteous (verse 1) versus oppression and tyranny, character that protects and shelters (verse 2) versus turning a blind eye to the oppressed and tyrannized, and "the capacity to distinguish character" (verses 3-8) where the masks men and women wear are removed and their social standing collapses with their facades. Those facades, titles, positions, institutional powers, protect many a predator and inspire others to defend them. That collapse begins at Isa. 32:3 when the eyes are opened and the ears hear:

The *closed eye* is typical of the blindness

of those who will not see. To shut the eye to evil, to turn the head away from what disgusts,—this may seem for a time equivalent to cancelling the evil itself. Not so; and reformation sets in from that hour when men are willing to face the most painful facts, to let the light into the darkest corners of existence. *Ears* were made to listen, not to be stopped. Let the bitter cry be hearkened to; its tones thrill through every fibre of our sympathetic being; nor let its pleading be dismissed until the question, *What can I do?* has found *some* distinct answer.⁹

Opressors and their conduct—even the instruments they use—are described so vividly in Isaiah 32:6–7 that one wonders how such men maintained high office (civil, spiritual, familial, pedagogic) so long, with a “good name,” without detection. Closed eyes and ears have their part to play in this.

But verse 5 promises the *explosion of social lies* referenced earlier, a phrase Smith coined for Isaiah’s description of the Kingdom: the fraudulent and crafty will no longer be called noble and generous. By implication, abusers and predators will no longer be protected by their spiritual offices, impressive titles, institutional apparatus, circled wagons, or external achievements.

What society needs is capacity to discern character, and the chief obstacle in the way of this discernment is the substitution of a conventional morality for a true morality. Human progress consists, according to Isaiah, of getting rid of these conventions; and in this, history bears him out. Above all, as Isaiah tells us, we need to look to our use of language.¹⁰

Why such concern about language? Because verse 5 is all about *reversing what things are called*—where names protect the guilty and further harm the afflicted. But in Isaiah 32 the Kingdom will be marked by calling people by the names their conduct has actually earned

them: all masks must disintegrate. While God directly indicts the abusive shepherds described in Zechariah 11, Jeremiah 23, and Ezekiel 34, *all* His people participate in the restitution of language, office, and authority described in Isaiah 32—which occurs as God enlarges the capacity to discriminate character as the leaven penetrates ever further.


Verse 8 concludes the passage by promising us that the truly noble person—one who acts as a covert and hiding-place—devises noble things *and upon those noble things shall stand*. His or her labors in the Lord are not in vain, and God rewards them with a *stability that is inaccessible among the things that are shakable*. How can Isaiah expect these people to stand upon the noble, the bountiful, things that they’ve devised and done? Because in Christ, “their works do follow them” (Rev. 14:13).

DEALING WITH ABUSE THEREFORE NOT A KINGDOM “SIDE ISSUE”

In light of the above, we must recognize the radical disconnect between how we currently deal with issues of abuse (familial, domestic, ecclesiastical, educational, governmental, etc.) and how Isaiah 32 depicts the Kingdom of God in operation. We talk about the priesthood of all believers, but not about the hiding-place-hood of all believers, the covert-hood of all believers, the boulder-hood of all believers, and we’ve furthered the devaluation of language by protecting the powerful against the powerless by emphasizing their ministerial or parental or leadership gifts rather than the evil they’ve hidden so well.

God makes clear that in His Kingdom, all of that is going to stop. And if you’re working to make it stop, to put into effect Isaiah 32, *to arrest the drift*, you are surely one of those who has

arisen and is building His Kingdom, sword in one hand, trowel in the other.

If you don't see the abuse issue and our response to it as a proper and legitimate Kingdom matter, as outlined above, perhaps you're building another kingdom altogether. Great will be the fall of it, however, for judgment begins at the house of God, and a refuge of lies has no future: their total overthrow *in this world* is certain. 

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1. <https://goodschoolhunting.org/2019/04/teachers-unions-oppose-bill-make-sex-students-crime.html>
2. <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/04/06/582831662/schools-are-supposed-to-have-pass-the-trash-policies-the-dept-of-ed-isn-t-tracki>
3. <https://chalcedon.edu/magazine/liberty-from-abuse>

4. The words are author Dave MacPherson's in his foreword to Ovid E. Need Jr.'s book, *Death of the Church Victorious* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, Inc., [2002] 2004), p. iv.

5. See Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969) vol. 2, pp. 384–386; J. A. Alexander, *The Prophecies of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, n.d.), vol. 2, pp. 1–2 F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, n.d.), Vol. 2, p. 48f. 6. Spence & Exell, *The Pulpit Commentary: Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950), p. 531.

7. George Adam Smith, *The Book of Isaiah*, in W. Robertson Nicoll, ed., *The Expositor's Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982 [1903]), p. 679. Smith says of sin that it is “simply the longest, heaviest drift in human history. It arose in the beginning and has carried everything before it since. Men have reared against it government, education, philosophy, system after system of religion. But sin overwhelmed them all.”

8. *ibid*, pp. 679–680. I've adjusted the wording very slightly from several citations to improve readability.

9. *The Pulpit Commentary*, *op. cit.*, p. 527.

10. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 681.

ARE CHRISTIANS DESTROYING THE KINGDOM?

BY MARTIN G. SELBREDE

That is a fairly controversial title, but it follows from the Scriptural comparison of the diligent and the slothful. Scripture gives us important insights into diligence:

The hand of the diligent shall bear rule ... (Prov. 12:24a)

You see a man diligent in his labors? He shall stand before kings ... (Prov. 22:29a)

By contrast, Proverbs 18:9 teaches that the slothful man is a brother to the destroyer: such a one is, in effect, no different than a destroyer.

Here is the million-dollar question then: what do we do with Christians who incite their fellow Christians to set aside diligence entirely? What breed of Christians will we get when we no longer aspire to the blessings laid out above for those who are diligent? Who will bear rule if Christians aren't diligent in their labors? Who will stand before kings if Christians decide to retreat instead of advance in each field and discipline?

I had first encountered the following quotation in the early 1980s and

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used it in some presentations concerning the debilitating effects of retreatist theologies. It resonated with me because I later came to know a noted mathematician who had fallen under its spell (as well as the false doctrine of neutrality):

For instance, if a youth had a natural aptitude for mathematics, and he asked, ought he to give himself to the study, in hope that he might diffuse a serviceable knowledge of it, or possibly even enlarge the boundaries of the science—my friend [John Nelson Darby] would have replied, that such a purpose was very proper, if entertained by a worldly man. Let the dead bury their dead; and let the world study the things of the world ... But such studies cannot be eagerly followed by the Christian, except when he yields to unbelief.¹

With counsel like this (from the founder of dispensationalism promoting the imminent return of Christ), how many Christian mathematicians are we likely to spawn among faithful men? How many have we turned away to other pursuits?

Re-encountering this quote years later in Ovid Need's book, *Death of the Church Victorious*, I came to learn that more than mathematics had been targeted by Darby for Christian retreat. One footnote in Need's book has Darby saying, "I am anxious about a rumour I heard of your becoming a doctor ..."² So be sure to scratch doctors off the list of vocations where Christian diligence should be applied. No Christians will possibly stand before kings or bear rule given such marching orders.

THE WORST WAS YET TO COME

Deeper in that same footnote in Need's important book, the other shoe drops: "Though Darby held it sin to learn a trade, he allowed one to continue a trade if the person already had it before 'conversion' to his opinions ...

From Barbados, Darby rejoiced that many people came to understand that serving Christ and learning 'a profession or trade,' did not mix."³

No trades or professions, no sciences, no medicine ... this is as scorched as earth can get. This inverts Kuyper's famous dictum about how much territory Christ claims as "Mine!"

When people point out the cultural impotence of today's church, they're merely observing what was put into motion by theological design many decades earlier: we're reaping what we've sown, and we've sown nothing except some magic beans promoted via clever fables that we bought into. We then expected our Master to be happy if He gave us ten talents and we returned one.

Why did men leave the church soon after such dispensational thinking entered the picture?

Maybe the better question is, what men would consider staying in a church that preached a kingdom the size of a flea circus?

In the meantime, the humanists *were* willing to roll up their sleeves and be diligent in *their* labors for their false kingdom. They were wiser in their generation than the children of light.

Our hope is in the Lord, however, who still promises that our labors in Him will not be in vain. God can and will reverse Christian decline—even if He has to raise up a more faithful generation to do it with. Whether that will be necessary or not is on us. 🙏

1. Cited in Ovid E. Need Jr.'s book, *Death of the Church Victorious* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, Inc., [2002] 2004), p. 218.

2. *ibid.* Darby goes so far to say that wanting to be a doctor puts Christ's work "in a second place, and this seems to me evil ..."

3. *ibid.* You can understand why R. J. Rushdoony willingly wrote one of the two forewords for this volume by Rev. Need.



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