Biblical Theology of the Synoptic Gospels

We are continuing our Synoptic Gospels here, twelve units, if you’d like. We’re just about ready to start the tenth unit in this twelfth lecture and that is: “Biblical Theology of the Synoptics.”

A little introduction to biblical theology before we jump into the subject here. The phrase “biblical theology” has two rather different uses. One use of the term “biblical theology” is in contrast to unbiblical theology. Biblical theology is that doctrine which is in accordance to the Bible, the teaching of the Scripture. In a sense, biblical theology is orthodox theology. But another use of the term is in contrast to “systematic theology.” In this sense, biblical theology is the study of how a part, usually, or even the whole Scripture, presents theology in its own terms, vocabulary, images, structure, and that sort of thing. In this sense, biblical theology is trying to see what terms, pictures, etc., John used to portray God’s word, the Lord’s gospel, [and that] are in First, Second, and Third John, [and] in contrast to the terms Paul used in his epistles, or what terms Isaiah used in his prophecy. Because God worked through the individuals and created them with different abilities, put them in cultures with their various temperaments and styles, and put them in different periods in history, you wind up with different terms being used. We’re here interested in the second usage, though; of course, we want our study to be biblical theology in both senses.

The subject of biblical theology is really a vast one, and here we have time and space to look only at a sample. So the first thing we want to do is to look for some unifying themes in the Synoptic Gospels. Terminology of the Synoptic Gospels is often different from the rest of the New Testament even from the gospel John which covers the same events.
Word Statistics

One way to get a feel for some of the emphases of the Synoptic Gospels, as distinct from the rest of the New Testament, is from a study of word statistics comparing the relatively frequent usage of various words in the Synoptics versus the frequency of those words in the New Testament as a whole. As our sample study we’re going to consider the word frequencies in the Synoptics and in the whole of the New Testament. For this purpose remember that the length of the text of the Synoptics is at 1/3 or say .33 of the entire New Testament. So if the words occur way more than a third of the occurrences of the New Testament, and they are Synoptics, then they are especially common in the Synoptics. If they’re way below the 1/3, then they are rather uncommon in the Synoptics.

So let’s start here. Look at the topics of "Christology," "love," "faith," "salvation," "forgiveness," and "kingdom" and then various terms that occur under these. So take Christology first of all: take the relevant words “Christ,” the phrase “Son of Man,” and the phrase “son of God.”

The term “Christ” occurs forty times in the Synoptics and occurs 750 times in the whole New Testament. So if you work out the fraction .05, [it's] very low compared to .33. So the term “Christ” is actually rarer in the Synoptics than with the rest of the New Testament. On the other hand, the term “Son of Man” occurs seventy times in the Synoptics and only eighty-seven in the whole New Testament, so 80% of the occurrences are in the Synoptics, which is quite high; and it turns out almost all the rest of them are in John.

The term “son of God” occurs twenty-six times in the Synoptics out of seventy-nine in the New Testament, which works out to be .33, which, accidentally, happens to be right on the average. So there’s an example, where “Christ” is a rare Synoptic term, “Son of Man” is an unusually common Synoptic term and “son of God” is about the same as it is throughout the rest of the New Testament as a whole.

Take the two terms for “love,” not thinking of the various terms for love,
but the verb *agapao* and *agape*. The term *agapao* occurs twenty-three times in the Synoptics out of 126 in the whole New Testament, so it is low—.18 compared to the .33 we think of. *Agape* only occurs twice in the Synoptic Gospels out of 107 in the whole New Testament, so .02. So it’s very low. So although Jesus is frequently seen doing loving things in the Synoptics, that terminology is not the standard Synoptic terminology. When you think about John, you immediately realize that’s a very high frequency word there.

“Faith” we take again as two words. The verb *pisteuo*, to believe, to trust; and *pistis*, trust, trustworthiness, etc. *Pisteuo* 34/233 is .15, so low; and then *pistis*, that is 24/233, so .10 and also low. So surprisingly, “faith” is not a real common Synoptic term, although, again, if you’re familiar at all with it, you realize that’s a big Pauline term and a big Johanine term as well, but not in the Synoptics.

“Salvation”: Here we pick three words. The verb *sodzo*, the abstract noun *soteria*, and the actor—a word *soter*, savior. *Sodzo*: 4/42, just under .09, low. *Soteria*, 45/103, .14, high. And *soter*, 2/24, .08, low. So the Gospels talk about rescue, deliverance, [and] salvation rather frequently, but they don’t talk much about the verb itself, nor the actor spoken of at this point, which again is a little surprising. Again you’ll remember my discussion of the literary features of the Synoptic Gospels—that they don’t bring in their post-resurrection perspective. They are trying to help you look at Jesus as he appeared to the people; or his death on the cross and its significance became apparent even as writers know something of that sort. But they’re trying to let you feel what it would look like.

“Forgiveness”: The verb *ophieme*, to forgive and forgiveness, and *ophesis*, forgive [appear] 114/144 [and] is .79, so that’s high. And *ophesis*” [is] 8/17, .47, which is high, but nowhere near as high as *ophieme*. So the Gospels appear to be about forgiveness.

And then “kingdom”: *basileia* is the kingdom and *basileo* to rule. *Basileia* 119/160, [or] .74, so that’s very high. Kingdom is a theme in the Gospels, in the Synoptic Gospels particularly; you may have guessed that if you read them before.
Basileus [king] is 44/110, or .40, a little high; and basileo, to reign, [is] 4/19, [or] .21, a little low.

So I asked my students, “Why do you think 'Christ' is relatively rare in the Gospels, but ‘Son of Man’ is enormously common?” I got various responses, but this is part of what Wrede’s "Messianic Secret" is based upon. Jesus did not walk into town and say, “Hello, fellows; I’m the Messiah.” He did not, as Satan suggest that he do, make a soft landing in the temple and say, “Hello, fellows; the Messiah has arrived.” That is not the way God planned to have Jesus come, and that would have immediately polarized everything; and the authorities would either have to give in to them without repenting and obviously interfere with a substitutionary death as well. So we can’t work all that out. God is back there working out all the strands of the plot and various plots as they weave together, but that is at least part of it.

Why is the term “Son of Man” enormously common? It is not easy to see, but its Jesus’ choice of the term he is going to use for himself. It’s a term, that if you hit on the right passage, it basically says, “I am the Messiah.” But there are a bunch of other passages which might just mean “I’m a human,” which, of course, he is. Or you might think, "What does God mean when he calls Ezekiel 'Son of Man’”? Does it mean just human, which it might; or does it mean some person chosen to carry out God’s commands? So it is ambiguous [as] was the intention there.

Kingdom in the Synoptics

Hermann Ridderbos in his book, The Coming of the Kingdom, which is a biblical theology of the Synoptics, picks up these and other features as well by seeing the major theme of the Synoptics to be the coming of the kingdom. As a sample study of biblical theology, we want to here summarize Ridderbos’ main points with occasional suggestions where I disagree with him, and things of that sort. The kingdom—as a major theme in biblical theology of the Synoptics—there are 31 passages where the phrase “kingdom of heaven” is used, and they are all in
Matthew; plus [there are] another 49 passages with “kingdom of God,” and only 4 of these are in Matthew. We are going to study these passages plus others which use the term “kingdom” without either of those endings, but with a context which makes it clear that it's God’s kingdom that is in mind rather than Herod’s kingdom, or Caesar’s kingdom, or something like that. Plus [we will look at] other passages which seem to be talking about the kingdom but do not use the term at all. That’s the trick when you get into word studies as [you are] trying to figure out what they tell you about a book or something, [or] to find the places where the passage has places where the phrase is used or places where a synonym is used, and that sort of thing.

The Kingdom Characterized

Well, first of all, the kingdom characterized: It seems to me to be a mistake to make any huge distinctions between the phrases “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God.” Mark and Luke never used the former phrase; they never use “kingdom of heaven,” but use the latter phrase “kingdom of God” in places where Matthew uses “kingdom of heaven”: for example, Matthew 4:17 versus Mark 1:15, or Matthew 5:16 versus Luke 6:20. In fact, Matthew himself uses both “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” in parallel in Matthew 19:23 and 24. The standard guess today is that Matthew uses the pious Jewish practice of substitutes for explicit references to God. So among modern orthodox Jews writing in English, you’ll see them writing G_D instead of God. Or, if they are using a sort of pseudo-Hebrew, they put Elokim instead of Elohim; they put a “k” instead of an “h,” or other things like that. That’s a modern way, if you like, of avoiding the use of the name of God. We think the name “Jehovah” comes from something of the sort as well, where the consonants for Yahweh are given the vowels for “adonai.” I will not run into an explanation of that. Well, one of the substitutes used in New Testament times for “God” was “heaven.” There were a bunch of other substitutes as well: “The Name,” “The Place,” and things of that sort.
Ridderbos suggests that the kingdom spoken of by Jesus in the Synoptics can be characterized by the following terms: the kingdom is theocratic; the kingdom is dynamic; the kingdom is messianic; the kingdom is future, but the kingdom is also present. So let’s say a word or two about each of those.

Theocratic is pretty straightforward—the kingdom is ruled by God. So that seems to be the correct terminology for "kingdom of God": that it is God’s kingdom; and "kingdom of heaven" [expresses] as well what is said about this particular kingdom. So Jesus is talking about God ruling in some way.

It’s dynamic in the sense that the term “kingdom” is not primarily used as our English word “kingdom” is. Our English word “kingdom” is primarily used to refer to a spatial territory. So the United Kingdom are the territories ruled by the king or queen of England and in this case that is England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland as a United Kingdom. But rather the term "kingdom" is used to refer to the kings’ activity. So it’s the rule of God, the rule of heaven, if you like. And that kind of rule can take place among God’s followers in a world that is otherwise in rebellion against him. So in the "kingdom of heaven," we are going to come back and talk about the "already and not yet," but in the already sense—in the hearts, if you like, and in the lives of his followers; but one day it will be universal in this other sense.

The kingdom of God is then not only theocratic and dynamic, but it’s also messianic. It’s messianic in that God rules through his mediator, the Messiah. "Messiah" is a term that comes from the Hebrew word “to anoint,” and christos comes from the Greek word “to anoint”; and they both have the idea that God has selected someone to function as his mediator, or agent, in some type of activity.

As we’ve already seen in the Synoptics, Jesus uses the term “Son of Man” to refer to this, but to do so in an ambiguous way; but “Son of Man” has a very important background in Daniel chapter 7 where the four kingdoms representing the successive kingdoms of humans on earth are represented as wild beasts. Then one like a "son of man," one like a human, comes before God, and he receives
from God the eternal, universal kingdom. So the Son of Man is the one who is going to be the eternal, universal ruler; and the eternal, universal ruler is basically a definition of Messiah, if you like. So while the term is not used there, that’s what it means in that passage.

"Already but Not Yet" Aspects of the Kingdom

The kingdom is future in that it is regularly described in strongly eschatological terms and is not yet having come. Yet it is present in some real sense, as the kingdom also comes in Jesus’ first coming. This solution seems to me to be better than the old traditional dispensational emphasis of the kingdom [that] was offered to the Jews and rejected, and so the kingdom was withdrawn and doesn’t come back again until the Millennium. I think when you work through the passage, it is already here in some sense. That brings us into Ridderbos’ discussion of, on the one hand, the kingdom is present and, on the other, this kingdom is provisional. So let’s look first at the idea that the kingdom of God is present, it’s already fulfilled, it’s already come.

The present aspect of the kingdom can be seen in a number of themes. For instance, Satan, the Wicked One, has already been overcome. He has already been defeated at Jesus’ temptation, which is pretty crucial when you think of his temptation as parallel to Adam and Eve’s temptation; but theirs was in the garden, and he is in the wilderness. [For] Israel’s temptation, they are in the wilderness; he is in the wilderness, et cetera. So it seems his defeat is at Jesus’ temptation. When Jesus' disciples cast out demons, he is overcoming, and even they are overcoming, Satan’s power in the rather fawning behavior of the demons, and perhaps even in the fall of Satan, narrated for us in Luke 10:18 through 19, Luke11:21 and the other parallels in the Gospels. I’m inclined to put at least one of those as viewing the future rather than actually having occurred; yet that’s one of the places where Ridderbos and I would differ.

Jesus’ miraculous power is already being displayed at his first coming, making visible the restoration of creation, and that is, in fact, one of the themes, if
you like, as you look through the healing miracles and the nature miracles, and such restoration of creation and the fulfilling [of] messianic prophecy as we see in Mathew 11:5 and 8:17. In the work of Jesus, God is visiting his people as the crowd shouts out in Luke 7:16.

The good news is already being proclaimed as predicted in Isaiah 52:7: “Good news, your God reigns,” etc., [and] in Isaiah 61:1-2, which Jesus read in the Nazareth synagogue and proclaimed as fulfill this day in Luke 4:21. Jesus’ followers, in some sense, already possess the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5: 3-10, “for theirs is the kingdom.” Similarly, “Blessed are you because you see,” whereas these others didn’t see, Matthew 13:16-17. “This day salvation has come,” Luke 19:9; or “Your names are written down” according to Luke 10:20. Jesus the Messiah is already here. The Messiah has come. He’s identified [as] the Messiah, “my son,” at his baptism (Matthew 3:17) and parallels at his transfiguration (Matthew 17:5 and parallels). They pick up the theme “my son” in 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 2.

The “Son of Man” is present in lots of passages. Jesus’ "I-sayings" are a powerful testimony to who he is, Matthew 11:28, 12:30 and 10:32-42. So the kingdom of God is present.

But this present kingdom is provisional, not yet complete—not the whole story. The biblical presentation is really more complex than just a present kingdom or just a future kingdom. I remember when I was taking a required course in the Bible at Duke back in the early 60’s; the liberals would regularly say, “Well, there were two different views, and some people thought Jesus and the kingdom had come, and some people thought it was eschatological, and somehow the sources mixed these together.” But, in fact, the tension between the two is a very biblical theme. The kingdom is both present and future. Both elements occur, though the Gospels don’t use our distinctions "present," "future;" or "first coming" and "second coming." They’d rather use the distinctions "this present age" and "the age to come." For example, see Mark 10:30. We see a unity with tension, which is
reflected in John the Baptist when he sends messengers to Jesus in Matthew 11:2-6: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” Jesus gives him a response: “Look at these things that are happening.” John already knows these are things that are predicted about the Messiah.

So the time of the Evil One still continues. Satan still has power. So this is one sense in which the present kingdom is provisional. So in the Lord’s Prayer, “Deliver us from the Evil One” is what we pray. Satan desires to have Peter, Luke 22:31. The tares are growing with the wheat, and the tares are the sons of the Evil One. The demons are afraid that Jesus has come to torment them before the time, Matthew 8:29. So, the time of the Evil One continues.

The miracles that Jesus does are merely signs. They’re real miracles but they’re not immediately followed by the consummation. Jesus limits their use, even when their use of the evidence is restricted and connected in one way or another with faith. So Jesus—think of the pool of Bethesda—there’s this whole crowd of people there. Jesus heals one person. So the signs indicate the coming of the kingdom; they point to the end, but they are not even the beginning of the end, which is sketched for us in the Olivet Discourse: “These things are the beginning,” etc. Their purpose is subservient to the preaching of the Gospel. They are to attract people; they are to tell us something about who Jesus is and to get people to listen to the Gospel. People don’t always hear him that way; you can see from their using the feeding [of the 5000] to get fed and come back for another course, if you’d like.

Jesus speaks to the crowd in parables to reveal and to conceal for those who do and don’t understand the mystery of the kingdom [respectively]. The king is here, but the kingdom is not yet as expected. The parables the kingdom also show us that the sowing begins with Jesus' coming, but the harvest is not until the end of the age. The kingdom’s advance is pictured not in terms of military conquest, but in terms of growth. The judgment is thus delayed. The tares are allowed to grow together along with the wheat until the end of the age.
The master in the parable of the pounds will go away to receive his kingdom and then return. Meanwhile, what people have done to others is treated as equivalent to what they’ve done to Jesus—in the sheep and goats material in Matthew 25.

During this delay, the kingdom is at work through the word of Jesus and the labors of the disciples. Several growth parables, [but] not all of them, picture the growth of the word. The parable of the pounds and talents picture a time for servants to use what has been entrusted to them. This labor that they are to do involves seeking what is lost.

The parable of [the] fig tree and the vineyard that the gardener is going to dig around it [the tree] and put more fertilizer on it, Luke 13, indicates there’s still time for repentance.

The seeking is pictured in the lost sheep materials (Matthew 9, 10, 15 and Luke 15), [and] the parables of lost coin and lost son (Luke 15). In contrast to the harvesting done by the angels at the end of the age (Matthew 13), here the harvesting is done by Jesus’ followers in this age (Matthew 9:35-38).

It is to the provisional kingdom that the "Servant of the Lord" materials [bring] along. The Christology of the Synoptics has two focal points—the Son of Man and the Servant of the Lord, so picking up the Daniel passage and the Isaiah passage, if you like. The former emphasizes by means of Daniel 7, but with ambiguity, Jesus’ kingship. The latter Servant of the Lord stresses his obedience and suffering. The temptation of the wilderness shows us that the path of glory lies through obedience, hardship, and suffering. Jesus refuses to take the quick, spectacular way, the soft landing at the Temple, or bowing down to Satan and getting all the kingdoms of the world. This is in fulfillment of the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah 40-55. The "Messianic Secret" [discussed above] is necessary to rejection.

So what’s the relationship between Jesus’ kingdom and Jesus’ cross? Well, there’s obviously only a minor outworking of the kingdom before the cross. The
crucifixion in some sense postpones the last judgment, opening space for the provisional present kingdom, and the preaching of the Gospel really only develops after the resurrection.

So that brings us to Ridderbos’ discussion of the Gospel kingdom. What is this good news of the kingdom? Ridderbos sees two aspects: good news—salvation (that certainly sound like good news), and commandments (which doesn’t sound like good news to most of us in this rather slack age). Strictly speaking, the good news is not news; it’s a fulfillment of the Old Testament promises. It’s good news to the poor, especially for the godly who were oppressed. The Beatitudes and the Luke presentation is clearer with the blessings and curses set beside each other. The godly who are oppressed are seen also in the parable of the unjust judge. Those who are oppressed are also seen as judged unfairly.

What salvation is being offered? What rescue is being offered? Well, Ridderbos says it's remission of sins! It's fulfilled in Jesus' coming and work. His good news of salvation is the antithesis of the rabbinic doctrine of reward, and this gets us a little bit into the old view of Paul versus the new view of Paul, etc., and I have to say in most lines I come down with the old view of Paul in this particular thing. Jesus' good news of salvation is kind of the opposite of the rabbinic view of reward. Think of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14. “God, I thank you I'm not like other guys, particularly this tax collector.” It gives assurance of the certainty of salvation. It's fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, the true son of God. While it’s not earned by us, those who are saved are characterized by doing the Father’s will. Of course, it is earned by Jesus, so he earns it for us. And yet, those who are saved are characterized by doing the Father’s will. It is a very important part of the Gospel which tends to get lost in this Lordship-salvation controversy with one side that basically says, “Well, nothing needs to show up in your life,” whereas the biblical picture is if you are actually saved, these things will show up in your life.

How do the commandments fit into the good news? God’s intention is for
his children to be righteous. Why is it [we have] all this problem of judgment and hell and that sort of thing? It's because we're not righteous; God didn't save us for us to be unrighteous for eternity. God saved us to be righteous. God’s demands are summarized as “righteousness.” All other values we might have are to be sacrificed for the kingdom, that's what really counts. The good works we do demonstrate the presence of the kingdom. We fulfill the law as told on the Sermon on the Mount by giving it its full measure. The Sermon on the Mount in fact gives the antithesis to the rabbinic interpretation of the law: “You have heard it said but I say to you.” Jesus is not against law, but against refusal to be fully committed to God’s law, a rather different take than his common antinomian society.

The kingdom and the church: Ridderbos asks, "How is the kingdom related to the church?" Ridderbos suggests that the kingdom is God's work of salvation consummated in Jesus Christ. His rule is [that] this is going to happen, this is going to be worked out through Jesus. The church, by contrast, is the people who are called by God. They share in the bliss of the kingdom and, of course, they participate in Jesus' work of salvation by spreading the message and by being samples, if you like.

Ridderbos asks, "How is the kingdom related to the Lord's supper?" He suggests that the Lord’s Supper displays two themes: the death of Christ and the eschatological kingdom. With death of Christ, that is the eschatological kingdom. He [Jesus] says, "I won't eat of this again until I eat with you anew, and I won't drink of this unless I drink it with you anew in the kingdom, etc." "In as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you do so until the Lord's coming."

The Lord's Supper makes a distinction between the commencement and [the] consummation of the kingdom. This is also seen in the provisional nature of the [Lord's] Supper. I remember Elio Cucaro, one [of] our grads [at Biblical Seminary] did a doctrinal dissertation on the Lord's Supper in the reformation. He gave a talk at Biblical Seminary and he said, "this is a picture of the eschatological kingdom that you drink a little cup and a little piece of bread." It's designed so
you're not to mistake it for the actual supper itself. It is seen in the provisional nature of the supper mere tidbit “until I come.” It is a picture of our table fellowship through Christ's death. It pictured Jesus as a sacrifice inaugurating the new covenant, the new covenant in his blood. That's interesting there: when Moses inaugurates the new covenant, he says, "This is the blood of the new covenant, and he sprinkles it on the people, on the outside of the people." Jesus says, “This is the blood of the covenant,” and we take it inside ourselves—an interesting contrast there as well.

Against the Roman Catholic position, the Lord's Supper is a sacrificial meal rather than the sacrifice itself. In the Old Testament background, the sacrifice has already taken place, and the animal is cooked and prepared for, say, for a thank offering, or vow offering, or something instead of a meal, etc., because the sacrifice has already been made once for all time, as we see in the book of Hebrews, though it’s not explicit here in the Gospels.

**Future Kingdom**

Lastly, Ridderbos turns here to think of the future consummation of the kingdom. Liberals suggest that Jesus and the disciples talked of the Second Coming occurring in the first century, but they were mistaken; that's the standard liberal view of the matter. But Ridderbos says this is a simplification of a complex problem by the selective discard of inconvenient data. A good methodological statement there, I think. That one of the features you see in liberal treatments of the Gospels is a very elaborate dividing up of the material, and [this led to] the elaborate, different discussions of circles and groups [of critics] that advocated these different things and advocating a very simplistic view of things. Whereas the biblical picture is, you obviously got heretics; but the unified teaching of the Scripture—and Jesus' true followers [are] trying to follow that—but the teaching itself has some complexities in it.

Ridderbos notes two things in Jesus' predictions: There are passion statements, which basically lead us to a picture of Isaiah's prediction of a suffering
servant; and there are parousia statements, which arise out of and lead us back to Daniel's “Son of Man.” These were not to put together before the resurrection, so the disciples didn't understand how to put them together.

The Great Commission then in Matthew 28:16-20 lifts the veil from this mystery and inaugurates a new period in salvation history. This had previously been implicit, so like the Gentiles [coming into the kingdom] and that sort of thing, but had not been made clear. The resurrection discloses an intimate relationship between Jesus' role as a servant and as the Son of Man. The events that took place during his resurrection—the temple veil tearing—the resurrection prefigures the end of the age, the Parousia. The end of the age itself is an orientation point, a goal, for the period following Jesus' resurrection. The disciples work and goals are now viewed in light of the Second Coming: namely, that a great task precedes the eschatological coming of the kingdom.

Jesus, however, gives no hint as to how much time span would elapse before the Parousia. Jesus' disciples are called to discern the times. The Second Coming is to be sudden, but signs are not excluded. We certainly won't need signs to recognize its occurrence. So Jesus gives us an example of the lightning flash in which you can be facing the wrong direction and you can [still] see the lightning—even with your eyes closed you can see the lightning. And the vultures you can [see] even when you can't see the carcass at that distance, but you see the vultures circling it. You don't have to be at the [exact place of the] Second Coming to see it; there will be signs pointing to it.

Jesus' main eschatological teachings, says Ridderbos, is given in the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21. It can be outlined as follows: There's first the beginning of sorrows: then there's the Great Tribulation; and then there's the Parousia, or the second coming. Ridderbos points out that the Great Tribulation refers to the fall of Jerusalem but not exclusively so, and I agree with him on that particular point. You are beginning to get some extreme preterists
who say the fall of Jerusalem was the Second Coming, and there isn't going to be another. There are others who say that’s at least what Olivet Discourse is about.

I think it's more than that. My read would be perhaps a little different than Ridderbos’—that events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem is kind of a "dress rehearsal" for the Second Coming. Ridderbos points out that Matthew and Mark coalesce two motifs: the fall of Jerusalem and the Second Coming. Again, my response would be, there is going to be another fall of Jerusalem in connection with the Second Coming, as well as the one in connection with the First Coming, if you like.

What are we to make of Jesus’ time limit pronouncements as kind of a standard theme of liberal theology? Perry Phillips, when he was at Cornell, once went to Sage Chapel to hear Archbishop [James] Pike speak, and he tells me that one of Bishop Pike’s statements was: “Well, Jesus said he’s coming back again, where is he? It’s been 2,000 years, etc.” That, in fact, was already predicted that there’d be that kind of reaction.

This Generation

Ridderbos’ interpretation of what is meant by “this generation,” which Ridderbos’ read is [that] certainty it is without any time indication, seems somewhat weak to me. I favor the said reference to be that Jesus is doing what is not uncommon in many, many of the prophecies of the Old Testament, and that is the listeners are asked to imagine that they're present when some future event occurs. So Jacob, in his last will and testament in front of his sons, says: “You Reuben, this’ll happen to you; this’ll happen to Judah, etc.,” but in fact they’re going to happen to their descendants down the line quite a ways. So I take Jesus to be saying, “The generation that will not pass away” is the generation that sees these signs he’s mentioned. The stuff is not going to be spread over a thousand years or something of that sort; the distinctive signs will come rather close to the end of the age.
Ridderbos thinks that “some standing here” refers to the resurrection. So “some standing here will see the kingdom coming in its power” refers to the resurrection. I have no objection to that being one of the references, but all three of the Synoptic Gospels immediately give the transfiguration: one of them without even a chapter break, and the other two with chapter breaks. But the Gospel writers didn’t put the chapter breaks in, so that would be my read on that.

I believe, however, that Jesus’ ambiguity in both these is intentional. He did not intend that we would know that it’s not going to be for 2,000 years, or however long it’s actually going to be.

The Parousia parables that Ridderbos [discusses] point to a substantial period between the ascension and the Parousia, but we can’t tell in advance whether it’s to be years or centuries. Obviously, once we’re out centuries looking back, we can tell it’s to be centuries given that Christianity is true.

What about the fulfillment and consummation of the eschatological prophesies? The Synoptics don’t give a systematic presentation of eschatology; probably the book of Revelation would be the nearest, and you can see all the dispute over that as well. You basically have a situation of putting together puzzle pieces by looking at various shapes and colors on each piece and putting them together, but you don’t have a full picture that allows you to know where all the pieces go.

Ridderbos sees several teachings which he says can be over-pressed to produce contradictions, but they’re actually consistent. I think that, in fact, is a nice general principle as well. There are lots of things that the Bible says that if you over-press them, if you try to make them do more than what the writer intended—and I’m here thinking of God as a divine writer as well as humans writing—that you will get things that don’t work right.

He suggests that these particular features show up, and if not over-pressed, are consistent. First of all, we’re called to pay attention to signs [but] not to be deceived by false messiahs. The signs he suggests are that there’s going to be: a
beginning of sorrows; there’s going to be the Abomination of Desolation; there’s going to be the Great Tribulation and there are going to be cosmic catastrophes. So you need to pay attention to those and not run off in other directions.

The Abomination of Desolation, says Ridderbos, has both Jewish and universal elements. I agree that that’s true. My suggestion is that this probably fits a Pre-millennial view better than it fits Ridderbos’ Amillennial view. [My view is] that these things will be going on in Jerusalem because the Jews are back there, etc., which Amillenialists in the 19th centuries did not expect, though certainly some Pre-millennialists in the 19th century did expect. I have an article by Samuel Kellogg on fulfilled prophecy, and he definitely in the 1880s was expecting the return of Israel, and he wasn’t going to predict when it would take place but saw that the biblical material pushed in that direction.

So pay attention to signs: the signs of beginning of sorrows, the Abomination of Desolation, Great Tribulation, and cosmic catastrophes. The Abomination of Desolation, as Ridderbos says, has both Jewish and universal elements. Some living at Jesus’ time will witness his powerful manifestation as Son of Man before they die, including his enemies. I suggest that involves: 1) the disciples’ visions at various times like we see in the book of Revelation; 2) he would say his enemies, well one, Paul, I think, on the road to Damascus; but two, the chief priests. These scared soldiers come running in, and what to do they do? They stonewall it; they’ve seen the signs, but they are going to keep being his enemies.

Another important point addressed to Jesus’ followers: Don’t give up praying for the coming of the kingdom, for God will speedily fulfill it in his time. Be watchful: no one knows when he will come, and don’t forget the great task in the meantime—what are we here for?

Ridderbos’ weakest section in his whole book seems to be this one on prophecy and history. He notes that prophecy lacks a time perspective and, that in fact is very similar to the dispensational mountain peaks of prophesy, and I agree
with that. It’s not set up so we can draw a chart and be quite sure that we have all the pieces in the right places. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t make some attempts in that direction.

Ridderbos sees an interweaving of Jewish and universal elements, as in the fall of Jerusalem A.D. 70, first, and the end of the age, second. This interweaving he suggests is not to be solved by form criticism, nor as an interpretation after the fact as though the Gospel writers were all writing after 70 A.D. Rather, he says, that the prophet paints the future in colors known to him, including his own geographical horizon. He’s poetic using figurative language rather than allegorical. I have no problem with that per se, but for much of eschatology we’re going to have to wait and see what happens. So your particular view may require you to interpret this way and that way, but you may be wrong. So we ought, even if we hold a particular view as being more likely than the others, to be ready to make adjustments, if it turns out that God has some surprises for us in that direction.

There are other themes in the Synoptics by which one could attempt to put together a picture of their theological teachings, but I believe Ridderbos has hit on a very important one in this phrase: “The coming of the Kingdom.”

So that’s a quick tour of the biblical theology of the Synoptics, and it picks up some idea of how it’s done, and some of the things that you can see there, and I think very valuable for that purpose. Well, we’ll see you again later when we look at the eleventh and twelve sections of our course.

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