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David Lipscomb's Theology of the Kingdom



On November 13, 1862 David Lipscomb met with Tolbert Fanning, E. G. Sewell, R. B. Trimble and several other men to discuss how Christians should respond to the Civil War. What came out of that meeting was a letter written by Fanning but containing the beliefs of all the men present.(1) The letter was addressed to "his excellency the President of the Confederate States of America" and it contained the reasons why these men would not participate in the Civil War.(2) The first paragraph of that letter presents a sharp contrast between "the Kingdom of Jesus Christ" and "any human government or power."(3) In order to understand David Lipscomb, the man, one must understand Lipscomb's beliefs concerning the kingdom of God. David Lipscomb's theology of God's kingdom shaped and influenced his life, work, and writings.

Lipscomb's theology of the kingdom was not something settled after he graduated from Franklin College in 1849. He first enrolled at the college in

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that was similar to what Lipscomb would later adopt

and make his own.(6) However, Lipscomb did not merely accept Fanning's position because this was his mentor, or this was what was taught at Franklin College. In 1851, Lipscomb was awarded a master's degree from Franklin College, and in 1855, he was asked to address the alumnus meeting that took place annually on July 4.(7) In that speech, Lipscomb chose to address the issues facing the United States. Robert Hooper wrote the following about Lipscomb's comments on that day.

Lipscomb heralded America as a nation founded upon ideas that came from God through Christ. She had denied self-love, he believed, seeking instead virtue, family affections, and brotherly love. Moreover, law in America was not just for the benefit of the few. Lipscomb considered the United States to be the first government founded on the principles of Jesus.(8)

On July 4, 1855, Lipscomb had yet to embrace a theology of the kingdom similar to Fanning's and one that put the kingdom of God in direct opposition to the kingdoms of this world.

By the beginning of the Civil War, Lipscomb's theology of the kingdom began to solidify. In 1860, he cast his vote for John Bell, a member of the Constitutional Union Party who wanted to preserve the Union.(9) By 1862, he signed the aforementioned letter stating he would not participate in the war. In 1863, he refused to participate in two separate thanksgiving worship services that were required by law. After Lipscomb failed to open the church building for one of the thanksgiving services, the Union army responded by putting a padlock on the door. The next Sunday, Lipscomb and O. T. Craig walked past all the soldiers and asked that the doors of the church building be opened. According to Robert Hooper, the explanation Lipscomb and Craig gave the soldiers was, "God had appointed the first day of the week as the day for worship; hence they gave little heed to days appointed by governments."(10) Hooper believes "The Civil War was a catalyst in the development of Lipscomb's life and his ideas."(11)

Lipscomb's theology of the kingdom is most clearly

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the Civil War, Tolbert Fanning and David Lipscomb began to produce the Gospel Advocate again. The Gospel Advocate began in 1855 but had to cease publication in 1861 due to the beginning of the war. After the war, David Lipscomb became the primary editor and focused much of his attention on the issue of the Christian's relationship to civil government. The contents of On Civil Government were first published in the Gospel Advocate between 1866 and 1867.⁽¹²⁾ Lipscomb's beliefs concerning the kingdom of God can also be found in the chapter "The Kingdom of God" from Salvation From Sin, his commentaries on the Bible, and many articles he wrote for the Gospel Advocate and other publications.

Scholars have not completely agreed on how Lipscomb viewed the relationship between the kingdom and the church. Richard Hughes suggests that "Lipscomb refused to identify the church with the kingdom of God,"⁽¹³⁾ but this suggestion does not hold up, especially in Salvation From Sin where Lipscomb almost uses the terms interchangeably. ⁽¹⁴⁾ Thomas H. Olbricht has called "The Kingdom of God" in Salvation From Sin "Lipscomb's chief treatment of the church."⁽¹⁵⁾ Hughes and Olbricht seem to contradict each other, but Lipscomb's theology of the kingdom contains elements of what both men seem to find important. Lipscomb defined the kingdom more broadly than the church itself⁽¹⁶⁾, but understood the church to be the most central part of God's kingdom at the present time. John Mark Hicks and Bobby Valentine have suggested that Lipscomb believed the kingdom developed in stages.⁽¹⁷⁾ They point to two separate articles Lipscomb wrote in the Gospel Advocate where he says, "The kingdom now established will yet pass through successive stages of development," and where he admits that "the kingdom of God certainly embraces more than the church of God on earth."⁽¹⁸⁾ Although Lipscomb's own statements can sometimes seem contradictory, this last view put forth by Hicks and Valentine seems to do the best job of describing how Lipscomb viewed the relationship between the kingdom and the church.

In both On Civil Government and Salvation From Sin, Lipscomb used the entire narrative of Scripture to explain his theology of the kingdom. He began in

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new Testament. Old Testament books like Genesis,

Samuel, and the prophets were important to his theology of the kingdom. Lipscomb did not mention every book within the biblical canon, but he did point out how the kingdom applies to every part of the biblical narrative.

The creation and fall are an essential part of Lipscomb's theology of the kingdom. He believed that God's perfect creation included God's perfect plan for governing humanity and the earth. He wrote, "God would govern and guide man; man would govern the under-creation, and so the whole world would be held under the government of God." (19) What happened during the fall, according to Lipscomb, was man's rejection of this plan. Although Lipscomb wrote about the fall in terms of individual humans, he primarily focused on its effects on government and institutions. He described it in this way,

It is clear that human government had its origin in the rejection of the authority of God, and that it was intended to supersede the Divine government and itself constituted the organized rebellion of man against God. This beginning of human government God called BABEL – i.e., confusion, strife. It introduced into the world the organized development and embodiment of the spirit of rebellion, strife and confusion among men. (20)

After the fall, Lipscomb would define all kingdoms and institutions within the world as part of the "kingdom of darkness." He believed these kingdoms and institutions are "distinguished from the true people of God." For Lipscomb, the powers behind the "kingdom of darkness" are Satan and his demons. (21) However, the world is not without hope. Lipscomb believed that immediately after the fall God put into action a plan to redeem his good creation. (22)

Lipscomb believed God played an active role in the life of Israel. He pointed to prophecies such as Gen. 22:16-18 as proof that God would "bless the nations of the earth" through Abraham and his family. (23) He believed God both blessed and punished Israel based on whether they accepted or rejected God's rule. He defined God's relationship with Israel in the following way:

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appointments, to trust him implicitly and faithfully: to have no part nor lot in the kingdoms and institutions of man's make and build, and that in doing thus the omnipotent strength of the living God was pledged to their defense and success.(24)

Lipscomb viewed the appointing of a king to Israel as Israel's rejection of God and his rule. In this instance he believed the people of Israel were imitating human kingdoms rather than the kingdom of God. He stated, "God ordained the Jews a king, not because he saw it was best for them, or promotive of their good, but to punish them."(25) Lipscomb believed the kingdom or rule of God was present during the life of Israel, but often they rejected it.

Just as important as the creation and fall, in Lipscomb's theology of the kingdom, was prophecy concerning a new stage of God's rule on earth. Lipscomb called the point of history where Israel was taken into captivity "the darkest hour of his [God's] kingdom."(26) It is in this "darkest hour" that Lipscomb believed God revealed his plans concerning the future of the kingdom. The book of Daniel plays a central role in Lipscomb's theology at this point. He looked to prophecies in Daniel, which not only mention an everlasting kingdom, but also mention the destruction of all other kingdoms. These prophecies helped shape Lipscomb's thoughts concerning the kingdom. He wrote, "The mission of the kingdom of God is to break into pieces and consume all these kingdoms, take their place, fill the whole earth, and stand forever."(27) What Lipscomb found in the book of Daniel was a picture of what was to come.

According to Lipscomb, the focus of Jesus' ministry was the coming of the kingdom and the reign of God.(28) While Jesus was on earth, Satan was ruling the kingdoms of darkness. Lipscomb interprets Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection as a battle between Jesus and Satan. He wrote, "The significant point of the advent of the Son of God into the world is that Christ and the devil met here in person to lead in the conflict for the mastery of the world."(29) In the temptation narrative, Satan offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world if he would bow down and worship him. Lipscomb saw, in this narrative,

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and to destroy the power of the evil one. (30)

The way Jesus would rescue the world was "through suffering, persecution, reproach, the death of the cross, the degradation of the grave, and after it shall be rescued he [Jesus] must surrender it up to God..."(31) Lipscomb also saw a battle going on between Jesus and Satan as Jesus healed the sick and restored the dead to life. These were things that Satan had introduced into the world and now Jesus was undoing them.(32)

While Christians await the full reign of God to come upon the earth, they are given instructions on how to live. Lipscomb described the Sermon on the Mount as "the principles that must govern in his [God's] kingdom." He saw these principles as being in direct opposition to human governments. He wrote,

No human government can possibly be maintained and conducted on these principles laid down for the government of Christ's subjects in his kingdom. The spirit that prompts the practice of the principles is opposed to the spirit needful for the maintenance of human governments. The two spirits cannot dwell in the same heart, nor the same temple, or institution.(33)

For Lipscomb, a Christian had to choose sides. Christians were either working to bring about God's full reign by practicing the principles of the kingdom, or working to promote the kingdoms of the world. There was no middle ground.

Lipscomb believed that God's ultimate plan was to take back the world and redeem it. This plan included more than humanity. Lipscomb noted the following about the fall, "The earth shared the curse of this rule of the devil. It became barren and desolate, producing only briars, thistles, thorns, and noxious weeds..."(34) Lipscomb believed that the creation would be redeemed in the end just as humanity would be redeemed. In his commentary on Romans he noted, "the whole creation will share this deliverance and be freed from the corruption and mortality to which it has been subjected by the sin of man."(35) In the end, Lipscomb believed these things would happen: The kingdom of God will break into pieces and consume all earthly

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heaven would be fully realized when these things were completed. He believed, the kingdom was not a temporary institution, but the only institution that will be in existence forever. He wrote,

The earth and the works therein "shall be burned up." What works? Not God's works. Not the kingdom which cannot be moved, and that shall stand forever; but the works, the institutions that have grown up under the rule of the devil in this world. They are to be destroyed, to be burned up, while the kingdom of God as the ark of safety will ride the sea of fire, bearing all committed to its keeping into the new heavens and to the new earth wherein dwelled righteousness.

(36)

Lipscomb's theology of the kingdom of God encompassed the entire biblical narrative. It has roots in Genesis and it will exist in the new heavens and new earth.

Lipscomb's theology of the kingdom was not just something that appeared in his writings and sermons. It was something that affected the way he lived his life. The ethics of this doctrine may have been the most controversial aspect of Lipscomb's theology. Lipscomb taught this theology and ethics at Nashville Bible School, a liberal arts college he founded with James A. Harding. Shelley L. Jacobs sums up the ethics that resulted from the theology taught at the school.

Commitment to an apocalyptic worldview calls for radical discipleship on the part of Christians. They are called to be non-materialistic, to minister to the poor and suffering, to live peaceful lives, and to be obedient servants of Christ despite any cost. Christians are called to live counter-culturally, and not in step with the world.(37)

The ethics Lipscomb taught and lived by were often viewed by others as radical, but it is important to understand his ethics were directly related to his theology and beliefs concerning the kingdom.

The ethics that drew the most attention to Lipscomb, and the ones he wrote about the most

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jury, or even vote.(38) Lipscomb understood Matt.

26:52 to not only apply to individuals, but to governments and institutions also. He believed that any institution that was built by the sword would die by the sword. Since the kingdom of God would stand forever it could not be built by the sword. He did not believe it was wrong for Christians to possess weapons, but he did believe it was wrong for them to use weapons against their fellow human beings.(39) Lipscomb argued that it was the Christians duty to convince others to withdraw from participation in human governments and to join the kingdom of God. He commented, "No violence, no sword, no bitterness or wrath can he use. The spread of the peaceful principles of the Savior, will draw men out of the kingdoms of the earth into the kingdom of God."(40)

Lipscomb's beliefs and practices concerning the poor were just as radical. Lipscomb faced the problems of poverty firsthand living in the South following the Civil War. Anthony L. Dunnivant describes Lipscomb's teachings on the poor as a way to imitate the kenosis of Christ.(41) He gives the following example from Lipscomb's own writings.

Let us realize that every helpless, needy one of our brethren is the personification of Christ to us appealing for help. He is our Christ, to be kindly welcomed and generously treated. Shall we cast our Christ from our doors and let him become a beggar from others?(42)

Lipscomb did not just believe caring for the poor was an individual's responsibility. He understood it to be a central work of the church and the kingdom. He wrote,

The crowning characteristic of the Christian religion is the esteem of its founder, is that the "poor have the gospel preached to them." The church that fails to exhibit that its first, most important work is to preach the gospel to the poor, has utterly failed to appreciate the true spirit of its mission, and the character of work it was established to perform.(43)

In Lipscomb's view, reaching out to the poor was kingdom work and something all Christian churches must do

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teaching at the Nashville Bible School and through

his writings in the Gospel Advocate. Echoes of Lipscomb's theology can be heard in some modern theologians such as John Howard Yoder, Walter Wink, Stanley Hauerwas, and others.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Although Lipscomb's theology was lacking in Churches of Christ in the middle and late 20th century, it seems to be making a comeback thanks to scholars such as John Mark Hicks, Robert Hooper, and others. Lipscomb's strong beliefs concerning the kingdom of God helped shape his theology, writings, and life, and now through the writings of others his theology of the kingdom continues to influence people today.

End Notes

1. Earl West, *The Life and Times of David Lipscomb* (Germantown, TN: Religious Book Service, 1987), 87.
2. David Lipscomb, *On Civil Government: Its Origin, Mission and Destiny and The Christians Relation to It* (Indianapolis: Doulos Christou Press, 2006), 128.
3. Ibid.
4. Robert Hooper, *Crying in the Wilderness: The Life & Influence of David Lipscomb* (Nashville: Lipscomb University, 2011), 38.
5. Ibid 65.
6. Tolbert Fanning, "The Mission of the Church of Christ," in *Biography and Sermons of Pioneer Preachers*, ed. B. C. Goodpasture and W. T. Moore (Nashville: B. C. Goodpasture, 1954), 529-532.
7. Hooper, 48.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid 58.
10. Ibid 63.
11. Ibid 64.
12. West, 91-92.
13. Richard T. Hughes, "Reclaiming a Heritage," *Restoration Quarterly* 37 (1995): 136.
14. David Lipscomb, *Salvation From Sin* (Nashville:

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organization or kingdom shall be overcome by the gates of Hades...save this one church which Jesus shall build, the kingdom of heaven, which shall never be destroyed."

15. Thomas H. Olbricht, "The Theology of the Church in Churches of Christ," *Restoration Quarterly* 50 (2008): 24-25.

16. Lipscomb, *Salvation From Sin*, 135. Lipscomb defines the kingdom here as "the rule of God on earth."

17. John Mark Hicks, Bobby Valentine, *Kingdom Come: Embracing the Spiritual Legacy of David Lipscomb and James Harding* (Abilene: Leafwood, 2006), 31.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Lipscomb, *On Civil Government*, 11.

20. *Ibid* 13.

21. David Lipscomb, *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1939), 127.

22. Lipscomb, *Salvation from Sin*, 129-130.

23. *Ibid* 130.

24. Lipscomb, *On Civil Government*, 25.

25. *Ibid* 23.

26. *Ibid* 29.

27. *Ibid* 30.

28. *Ibid* 58.

29. *Ibid* 47.

30. *Ibid* 49.

31. *Ibid* 53.

32. *Ibid* 59.

33. *Ibid* 57.

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Advocate, 1945), 135.

36. Lipscomb, On Civil Government, 83.

37. Shelley L. Jacobs, "Pacifism in Churches of Christ in Western Canada During World War II and the Influence of Nashville Bible School," *Restoration Quarterly* 48 (2006): 212-213.

38. Thomas H. Olbricht, "The Peace Heritage of the Churches of Christ," in *The Fragmentation of the Church and Its Unity in Peacemaking*, ed. Jeffrey Gros and John D. Rempel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 213.

39. Lipscomb, On Civil Government, 67.

40. Ibid 84-85.

41. Anthony L. Dunnavant, "David Lipscomb on the Church and the Poor," *Restoration Quarterly* 33 (1991): 78.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. I am not suggesting these theologians read Lipscomb, but merely that some of their essays, books, and lectures resemble what Lipscomb was teaching and preaching in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

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