

REFORMED PATHWAYS

Walking in God's World in the Light of His Word

The Good News of the Kingdom

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This insert to *The Messenger* is the fourth in a series of “Reformed Pathways” inserts in which Mid-America faculty members share insights regarding various areas of Reformed thought. The following article is PART ONE of a projected three-part series dealing with the biblical idea of the kingdom of God.

What is the Kingdom of God?

IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK, the first words we hear from Jesus are, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Indeed, the kingdom of God (or in Matthew’s Gospel especially, the kingdom of heaven) constitutes the theme of Jesus’ gospel preaching. The people of the Old Testament longed for the coming of the kingdom of God. This was to coincide with the coming of the Messiah. The Gospel writers were very concerned that with the coming of Jesus the Messiah we see the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise, that is, the arrival of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is present in the person of Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 12:29; Luke 11:20).

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But what is the kingdom of God? The ministry of Jesus gives us a portrait of its scope and reality. He summarized it as follows: “the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.

And blessed is he who takes no offense at me” (Matt. 11:6-6). What is unmistakable about the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, and the coming of the kingdom of God is that it brings forth not only the good message—indeed, the world changing event—of Christ’s work of redemption from sin and reconciliation with God, but it also encompasses the fullness of human existence to bring healing and restoration where there is disorder, disease, brokenness, and despair. As Jesus told the Pharisees, “If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28).

Many New Testament scholars have convincingly demonstrated that the phrases “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” (and other like phrases) refer to the rule or reign of God. I would add the words “redemptive” or “healing” or “restorative” to this definition—the healing-restorative-redemptive reign of God. A recent Reformed writer defines it this way: “The kingdom of God ... is to be understood as the reign of God dynamically active in human history through Jesus Christ, the purpose of which is the redemption of his people from sin and from demonic powers, and the final establishment of the new heavens and the new earth.” He continues: “It means that the great drama of the history of salvation has been inaugurated, and that the new age has been ushered in.” Given the scope and dimensions of Christ’s healing work,



“The kingdom must not be understood as merely the salvation of certain individuals or even as the reign of God in the hearts of his people; it means nothing less than the reign of God over this entire created universe” (A.A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 45). That definition, I think, well captures the center point and the breath of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is His redemptive, restorative, healing, returning-to-fellowship reign—and all this in, through, and because of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

What is the Church?

NEXT we turn to the question regarding the church, for it possesses an important relationship to the kingdom of God. It is important to see that the church may not be properly identified, without distinction, with the kingdom of God. The concepts of church and kingdom are not interchangeable. When Jesus says “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21), He does not mean that the church is within you. This is why most Reformed scholars, while acknowledging an intimate and inseparable relation between church and kingdom, do not

affirm a material identity between them.

This brings us to inquire about the nature of the church. The Bible, of course, gives us many portraits of the church. It is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27), the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:32), the sheepfold of Christ (John 10), the building, temple, house, and people of God (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet 2:5; 2:9, 10), and those called out of the world (2 Cor. 6:17). That is just a sampling of metaphors and images of the church. Other distinctions apply as well. The word “church” is sometimes used to designate its diversified but collective unity under Christ as its Head (Eph. 1:23; 4:16). Other times the Bible uses the word to refer to local congregations under office-bearers (1 Cor. 3:11, 16; 12:27; Rev. 2 & 3). The church, in obedience to Scripture, has long confessed about itself that it is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. These are its definitive attributes. Meanwhile, we know that hypocrites can be mixed in with God’s people undetected; hence the necessity of distinguishing between the church in its visible form (as we know it) and the church in its invisibility (known only to God). The church as visible and as invisible means that there does not yet exist an exact numerical unity between the church in its current visible state and the church in its invisible reality. God redemptively communes with its genuine members. Thus, regarding hypocrites in the church who claim in vain to have acted in Christ’s name, Christ says that He never knew them (Matt. 7:23).

The church may also be distinguished as militant in its current battle to bring the gospel to the nations and triumphant in its reign in glory.

Besides these distinctions, most believers know that the church is called to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. Some Reformed Christians are also familiar with the idea that the church (in its visibility) may be distinguished as an institution on the one hand and as an organism on the other—that is, the church must be conceived in the first instance as a gathered body of believers, under the govern-

ing leadership of appointed office-bearers, and called to bring the gospel to the world and nurture its membership with the means of grace; in the second instance these same believers—the church—are viewed as an organism, indicative of a community of faith and life, members of Christ’s body. Moreover, as an organism the church constitutes God’s people as dispersed into the world (even when they are not gathered in worship or fellowship), where



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in the pursuit of their vocations and in the exercise of their responsibilities as citizens, as well as their involvement in the day-to-day affairs of public life, they are to bear witness to Christ with their words and their lives (see Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 86); still further, as best they can, they are to exercise a Christ honoring presence (influence) in the wider social fabric of life, which includes the work place, political life, education (in the assorted disciplines of the academy), recreational life, sporting activities, hobbies, and other social and community affairs.

Within the history of Reformed theology, the kingdom of God has been viewed as embracing both of these aspects of the church’s existence. If the kingdom may be likened to a wagon wheel, the institutional church is conceived as the hub, and the members of the church, dispersed into the world, are regarded as the spokes. “The hub” fortifies and spiritually nurtures the church (its members) in the Word of God so that as “spokes” the church goes out into the world to live under the lordship of Christ, under the reign and sway and truth of the King, in every dimension of life, in all of its arenas and dimensions.

This vision of Christ’s Lordship and the kingdom of God has won the hearts of many Reformed believers, especially with the growing ascendancy of secularism dating back to the Enlightenment (starting about the eighteenth century) and the continuing assault upon biblical principles of morality in public life. Westerners have traveled a road that has taken them very far from the age of a Christian magistrate. Now public life and public institutions are regarded as secular, and the aim is to keep them free from the corrupting leaven of religion in any form. We recognize this simply as the separation of church and state. But, as we know, that separation means very different things to different people. How does the contest between the kingdom of God (the healing reign of God) and the kingdom of darkness (the reign of evil) play out not only in our individual lives as believers but also in public life, in social institutions, with regard to business practices, in the presuppositions and practices of education, environmental issues, and the like? What does the Scripture teach us about this contest?

In attempting to sketch an answer to those sorts of questions, we do well to return to the idea of the kingdom of God and examine it more closely. We begin by setting the kingdom of God within the big epochs of the biblical drama: creation, fall, and redemption. From here, we will be in a position to make more elaborate comments about the kingdom of God and the world.

The Kingdom of God and Creation

CREATION is God's wondrous and startling act of love and freedom. According to His own wisdom and goodness, and given the intratrinitarian fellowship of His perfect happiness and eternal counsel, and out of His almightiness and strength, God, in the beginning, creates the heavens and the earth. Creation is God's act to share His love and fellowship with beings other than Himself; it is an act grounded in His goodness and His freedom. Nothing compels Him to create except His own glorious love. In fact, God, in His kindness, creates human beings, fashioned in His image, to act as stewards of His creation and to walk in His blessed fellowship.

Here we see that from the beginning God intended and purposed a kingdom of God, which means that Adam and Eve were first created to live in fellowship with God, under His blessed rule and direction for their lives—and this was for God's glory and their happiness. Moreover, from the creation account in Scripture we learn that man's service to God encompassed the width and breath of life, symbolized in the naming the animals, along with the specific mandate and call to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the cattle and every creeping thing, indeed, over all

the earth and every living thing in it (Gen. 1:26, 28). We see that man's fellowship with God at the creation, before the fall, was not merely a frolic in the woods and a roll in the grass, praying and singing hymns all day long. Man's fellowship with God, living under God's favor and truth, and trusting His Lord and Creator enfolded life in its broad horizon and vast, varied diversity. The world, rich and variegated, was the arena of God's kingdom of communion with man, His image-bearer. Again, this was for God's glory and human happiness. At creation, the kingdom of God is centered upon God's relationship with man, but includes man's calling, in service to God, and so includes the whole environment of the created order—that is, man's capacity to know, develop, and enjoy the creation, with its divinely built-in potentialities, to be used for the glory of God, and the obedient exercise of dominion over all the earth and all living things.

The first epoch of human history, the creation before the fall, was a period of blessedness and innocence. To be sure, at this stage that blessedness was still in an embryonic state. Man's obedience was to be tested inasmuch as obedience to God—in the way of faith and full trusting devotion

to Him—was yet unproved; and so the blessed destiny awaiting Adam and his race had not yet reached its full potential. We may liken it to a bud waiting to come to full flower, a city of God that yet needed to be filled out, formed, and populated, a human pair that already enjoyed God's dominion and care over them, but did not yet know the full development and abundance of life under His reign.

This was the kingdom of God before the fall. It was immature and undeveloped, but it was present, ready to blossom to full flower. Indeed, the kingdom at creation—in the period of testing—presents in outline something of the beginning of man's blessing under God's kingly reign. Because of the fall into sin, the kingdom of God expressed at creation never reached beyond this mere beginning. The fall disrupted God's good creation and befouled God's image-bearer, creation's steward. Now the creation itself, lying under curse, subject to futility and in bondage to decay, groans and longs for the revealing of the sons of God (see Rom. 8:19-22). Creation, however, when it was still unfallen and unspoiled, was under the reign of God's fellowship and truth, and so here we see (still in infancy, so to speak) the first manifestation of the kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God and the Fall

AS WE KNOW, the sad story of the fall follows the amazing story of creation. Here our concern is not to explore all the dimensions of the fall into sin; rather, we specifically wish to discover how the fall impacts the kingdom of God. In the fall, human beings fell away from God and consequently find themselves in the clutches of the devil. Satan establishes a foothold in God's creation and persuades fallen human beings to join him as co-conspirators against God. Satan aims to foil the good purpose of God for creation and man, those called to image God. With the fall into sin, humans forfeited fellowship with God and life itself. They therefore forfeited the kingdom of God—that is, they forfeited the reign of peace, blessing, and communion with God in and for their lives.

Moreover, we must note that with the fall Satan becomes a prince—the ruler of this world (Eph. 2:2; John 12:31). God's reign of fellowship with His unfallen creation has come to an end. Now the cosmos is filled with alien forces, enemies to His cause; now God's beautiful purpose for the world is horribly imperiled and astray. Note: “imperiled” and “astray” but not forfeited and abandoned, for the Lord immediately promises the reestablishment of His kingship of fellowship through the Seed of the woman, whom Scripture unveils as Christ the Lord. The Seed of the woman must contend against the seed of the serpent—a combat waged through the ages but culminating in Satan being crushed under Christ's heel (see Gen. 3:15; Rev. 12; Gal. 5:16, 19). Consequently, in some sense, after the fall, it is proper to

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speak of two kingdoms—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. The kingdom of God after the fall must now take on important redemptive dimensions, and so it exhibits its most conspicuous traits from the contest that rages in the world between God and the devil for the hearts of God’s scarred and depraved image-bearers. Men and women, once free and innocent, are now enslaved and impure; and God comes to rescue them. God comes to reestablish His rule of blessing and fellowship over their lives. This is the reign of fellowship (the kingdom) God lost with the fall when He lost the allegiance of His human creatures and therefore lost His rule over their hearts and lives—hearts and lives He created for fellowship with Him to His glory and their happiness.

We see, then, that if there ever was to be a kingdom of God on the earth once more, then it would have to come; and in order to come, it would have to be God’s work. In fact, for that kingdom to come, it would have to be by God’s power and through God’s love—an overflowing and undeserved love. It would have to come through the Seed of the woman. And this coming kingdom would be nothing less than a radical assault upon Satan’s stronghold. Indeed, it must come with an attack on the forces of darkness, with a binding of the strongman, in order to plunder his house (Mark 3:27; cf. Rev. 20). Satan, who claimed title to the creation, the oppressor of all under his sway, must be bound so that his stronghold is looted for the sake of Christ and the kingdom of God. This, as should be obvious, is the very kingdom of God that Jesus Christ announces as having now arrived.

Before we go further, however, it is necessary that we recognize an important distinction in speaking about the kingdom of God, namely, the distinction between God’s kingship of sovereignty from His kingship of redemption and communion. The first we may call God’s kingship of power, the second His kingdom of redemption. Given the biblical portrayal of Satan as the prince and ruler of this world, we must observe the difference between God’s sovereignty and God’s kingdom. Sovereignty is that attribute of God whereby, according to His power and wisdom, He rules over all things outside Himself, all creatures, indeed, everything! God is sovereign; therefore He rules over all things. No matter what happens or doesn’t happen, His right and might are never thwarted or compromised or held in check. Nothing can stand in the way of His invincible power and authority.

Thus, after the fall, according to His sovereignty, God, by a mere word, could have cast all rebels into hell forever. But this was not His will. His will was to re-enter into fellowship with His human servants. God remains sovereign, for He always upholds the creation in the exercise of His providence and nothing transpires except according to His eternal decree. God as God is always sovereign; but God in fellowship with persons is an act of grace, which is born of His freedom and goodness.

All of which is to say that God always is King as sovereign. This is His providential reign over the creation. But that is not what is meant in the Bible by “the kingdom of God.” Rather, God willed a kingdom of fellowship and peace. This is the communion of God with His creation, reaching its pinnacle in the communion God establishes with His fallen, and now redeemed, image-bearers. If this kingdom is to come, God must work redemptively and that according to His grace and mercy, through the power of the Holy Spirit, who administers the perfect work of Christ for reconciliation. Make no mistake: God never loses His sovereignty (His kingship of power); but He must re-create His kingdom of fellowship and healing. God’s sovereignty simply and always is; but the kingdom of God must be purchased through the precious blood of Jesus Christ and come to reality through the Spirit’s application of Christ’s redemptive work.

Next time, the Lord willing, we will continue our discussion of the kingdom of God by examining how the kingdom reaches fulfillment in the epoch of redemption, especially with the coming of Jesus Christ and what it means that the kingdom has come and is yet to come.

Recommended Reading

If readers are interested in delving deeper into this topic, below is a list of valuable resources:

Herman Bavinck, *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society* (Baker, 2008)

Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Eerdmans, 1979)

George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Eerdmans, 1974)

Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Crossway, 2004)

Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging God’s World* (Eerdmans, 2002)

Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (P&R, 1962)

Geerhardus Vos, *The Kingdom and the Church* (Eerdmans, 1951)

Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained, 2nd ed.* (Eerdmans, 2005)

Raymond O. Zorn, *Christ Triumphant: Biblical Perspective on His Church and Kingdom* (Banner of Truth, 1997)

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