

REFORMED PATHWAYS

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

The Kingdom of God—Part 3

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In part one of this presentation, we offered a biblical sketch of what the Bible means by the kingdom of God. In part two of this survey, we traced out how the coming of Jesus Christ brings the definitive reestablishment of the kingdom of God. That is, it brings His reign of fellowship and healing. The coming of the kingdom of God ushers forth Christ's redemptive and restorative rule over the estranged and broken creation. In this third and last installment to this series, we next address the question surrounding the relationship between "the church" and "the kingdom of God" and, given that, how Christians should live in the world as citizens of God's kingdom.

Are Church and Kingdom the Same Entity?

When believers ask themselves, "What is the kingdom of God?" they confront a complex and multifaceted topic. Even though this theme is rather prominent in the Bible, the church has never quite reached agreement about what it is, when it comes, or how it is expressed. Some scholars have argued that the kingdom of God has fully arrived, while others have maintained that it is yet to come. The latter view looks for the kingdom of God to arrive in conjunction with Christ's second coming. Among those who espouse this view, some reduce the kingdom of God to a wholly spiritual, heavenly realm, a "heavenly" arena; others view it as the millennial reign of Christ upon the earth which precedes the final cataclysmic battle between God and Satan.

Other scholars have identified the kingdom of God with the institutional church. Augustine advocated this view, and it gained dominance in the medieval period. Not a few within the Reformed tradition have also assumed a mild version of this position. We must remember, however, that the Reformers did not develop a carefully crafted and well-researched understanding of the kingdom of God. As Louis Berkhof rightly observes: "The Reformers discussed the idea of the Kingdom of God in an incidental and fragmentary way, rather than in a systematic manner; and the Church of the immediately following centuries followed in their footsteps" (Louis Berkhof, *The Kingdom of God*, 24). Thus it is not until we arrive at the twentieth century that Reformed scholars gave the idea of the kingdom the attention it deserved. Prior to this more recent scholarly work, it was easy to follow Augustine and closely identify church and kingdom. For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith calls "The visible Church ... *the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ*" (chapter 25:2; italics added). Of course the question here is whether the Confession intends to demarcate the whole meaning and content

of the kingdom of God as directly identified with the church (an "is" of identity), so that church and kingdom are equivalent terms; or whether, instead, the Confession only intends an "is" of predication or attribution, in which case the phrase "the visible church ... is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ" means the church is an expression or a manifestation (an aspect) of the kingdom of God. The latter seems preferable, especially in light of Q/A 191 of the Larger Catechism, where, in setting forth the meaning of the second petition of the Lord's Prayer ("Thy kingdom come"), we discover that the kingdom involves, to be sure, very explicit ecclesiastical activities, including the propagation of the gospel, furnishing the church with faithful office-bearers, and the administration of Christ's ordinances for the conversion of the lost and the edification of believers. But as part of this program God enlists the civil magistrate and exercises His kingship of power (His providential sovereignty) to best serve these aims, and God also aims for more than the building of the church. To pray for God's kingdom to come is also to pray for the destruction of the kingdom and do-

minion of Satan—which, let it be noted, is a demonic dominion not limited to an ecclesiastical sphere of life. Moreover, the Larger Catechism, in expounding the meaning of the third petition of the Lord's Prayer ("Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven") teaches us that this petition includes our plea that God would, according to His grace, "make us able and willing to know, do, and submit to his will *in all things...*" (italics added) The doing of God's will and the coming of His kingdom in Jesus Christ include the whole scope of life—all things—within the creation.

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That church and kingdom are not equivalent terms is readily shown from Scripture. A further examination of the second petition of the Lord's Prayer bears this out. "Thy kingdom come" is not equivalent to saying "Thy

church come.” To be sure, this petition is not absent the establishment and the blessing of the church, but it is more. In praying this petition we are praying for the redemptive supremacy and rule of God to come forth and show itself in this world. The Heidelberg Catechism offers this exposition of the petition: “Rule us by your Word and Spirit in such a way that more and more we submit to you. Keep your church strong, and add to it. Destroy the devil’s work; destroy every force which revolts against you and every conspiracy against your Word. Do this until your kingdom is so complete and perfect that in it you are all in all.” The devil’s work is as wide as creation and the curse, and so the kingdom of God aims to destroy the devil’s work in all of created life and mitigate the curse—evidenced, as we noted before, in the healing works of Jesus. This touches marriage and parenting, social relationships and issues of social justice, economic and political policies, education and all its legitimate academic disciplines, business life, recreational life, indeed, all of life. For the kingdom of God to come is for the devil’s work to be destroyed wherever it is found—in disintegrating marriages, brutal or negligent parenting, wicked social structures, oppressive ideologies, false religions, immoral and oppressive economic and political policies, perverted educational programs and the idolatrous presuppositions that drive them, greedy business practices, etc. Again, to pray, “Thy kingdom come” does not correspond to praying only, “Thy church come.”

Positively stated, the kingdom is God’s kingship realized in His work of redemption, restoration, and reconciliation. It is His rule over us, His lordship exhibited in us, with its blessed effects, which further demonstrates why church and kingdom are not equivalent concepts. Jesus said that we must “receive the kingdom of God like a little child” (Mark 10:15). What must we receive? The church? No, we must receive, like a little child, God’s redeeming rule over us. In childlike trust and obedience, we must surrender to God’s healing reign and authority. Consider Matthew 6:33: “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.” What is to be sought is not the church, not the body of believers as such; rather, what we must seek first is the kingdom—God’s rule and redemptive reign in

our lives, God’s righteousness, and so we also seek “His righteousness.” That is to say, we are to seek first the rule and power of God’s justice and truth and blessing. So, yes, the kingdom gives birth to the church; the church expresses the kingdom; the church is even an arm of the kingdom. But the church is not identical with the kingdom. We can rephrase the above sentences: The redeeming reign of God gives birth to the church; the church expresses the redeeming reign of God; the church is even the theological hub, the driving engine of the redeeming rule of God in our lives and therefore a result of the redeeming reign of God, an expression of the kingdom. Moreover, the church is the most significant manifestation of the kingdom of God as we await the return of Christ. The institutional church, however, is not the whole of the kingdom of God. For the kingdom of God comes to manifestation where His will of precept is lived out in obedience and directed to God’s glory and in service to the world and our neighbors.

Remember, biblically speaking, the kingdom of God means that God is reigning redemptively and in a sanctifying manner so that life is brought into fellowship with Him and in obedience to His will. That kingdom-work of God is inclusive of but bigger than the institutional church. God’s restorative reign, then, is not identical with the church. In fact, apart from God’s life-restoring reign, the church is meaningless. The church constitutes the people surrendered to this reign of God, who live in communion with Him (and not only when they are gathered for worship or fellowship). The reign of God is explicated in the next petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven.” This is a prayer for peace and fellowship with God to be restored and for His righteous will to be lived out by us, like unto the communion God has with the angels and like unto their obedience to Him. This third petition, like the second, is a prayer for God to rule in a redemptive way, to destroy the devil’s work and every force which revolts against God’s Word. The evil forces that revolt against God’s Word are not limited to church life or the consistory room or the worship service. Every force that revolts against God’s Word aims to disrupt life from foundation to rooftop. The coming of God’s kingdom (His healing reign) challenges and will one day wholly overcome every conspiracy and every revolt against His will.

To acknowledge that the church is part (but not the whole) of the kingdom of God is fairly standard Reformed theology. To capture this point Louis Berkhof states that the kingdom “*is closely related to the Church, though not altogether identical with it*” (*Systematic Theology*, 409).

Berkhof also reminds us that our Redeemer, Christ the King, reigns in power and reigns in grace—that is, *as Redeemer and Savior, in His office of Prophet, Priest, and King*, He exercises dominion over the universe and everything in it. Berkhof calls it “His providential and judicial administration of all things in the interest of the Church.” (We made a brief note of this in the first article.) This kingship of Christ’s power, however, serves His kingship of

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grace wherein He brings His healing reign of fellowship and dominion of blessing to fruition in this world, first and principally manifest in the church. From this spiritual reign of Christ in the hearts of His people, the ethical implications—the sanctifying fruits—of that reign (kingdom) start to show themselves. Thus when believers pray, “Thy kingdom come,” they are certainly praying for the ministry of the church to succeed, but that prayer is inclusive of the next petition, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” which means that believers seek fully to obey God in Jesus Christ in every aspect of their lives since they share in His anointing. Believers are bonded to Christ by the Holy Spirit; they participate in Christ’s anointing

as Prophet, Priest, and King. They do not unbind themselves or disunite themselves from their Redeemer when they leave church on Sunday and go to work on Monday. They do not un-anoint themselves or de-Christianize themselves when they engage in the wider, diverse affairs of life: being a plumber, studying philosophy, going for work-outs, writing an English paper, selling paint. Truly, Christ's claims on believers bring implications to their calling in the world. Christ's work of redemption is not fenced off from the wider cultural affairs of life. It knows no boundary markers, declaring: "The Lord Jesus Christ has no authority here." No signs may properly be erected in front of a school or a business or any other valid piece of the creation that announces: "Christ the Redeemer has no claims here; you are entering a *No-Christ Zone*—a sector outside His jurisdiction!"

The Present Scope of the Kingdom

So what are the implications of these observations? Well, let it be emphasized that the first and central task of the church's mission is to propagate the gospel for the conversion of the lost and for the further building up of the already converted. This must be jealously championed.

Given that accent, we may also rightly observe that the reign of Christ, God's kingdom, does not stop with the ministry of the institutional church exercising the means of grace and the keys of the kingdom. Believers—under the lordship of Christ—live their lives before God's face in all that they do; and so they live their lives in the vast public arena of the world of unbelief as neighbors and fellows, co-workers and colleagues, teammates and business associates. Christ's Saviorship and Lordship are not limited to the vital ministry of the institutional church on earth, gathered on Sundays for worship. It begins there, to be sure. Its glory is most manifest, celebrated, and treasured there, as it should be. But it isn't confined to those boundaries. For the church, God's people, live *coram Deo* (before the face of God) *in Christ* and therefore *in Christ*

in all that they do—from agriculture to law, from engineering to the trades, from the culinary arts to political life, from education to athletics—even as they live *in Christ* before God's face as fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, grandparents, siblings and all other legitimate social bonds. Christ's saving work may not be cordoned off from the width and breath of life, restricted to an ecclesiastical sphere, so that His redemptive operations only impact—as if they were only intended to impact—my soul's salvation, which only directs my personal and corporate worship, along with my fraternal fellowship with the gathered community of faith. This is grievously mistaken!

Christ's Saviorship is not so limited; and therefore *His Kingship*, His kingdom, is not so limited. Christ is cosmic Lord because He is cosmic Savior. All authority in heaven and on earth belong to Him—*all of it!* Every evil force, every conspiracy against God, must meet destruction (HC, Q/A 123). All wickedness is destined for demolition. Therefore, as we pray "Thy kingdom come" we engage that fight, feeble though our efforts be and weak as we are. In submission to His Word and empowered by His Spirit we seek to honor and love the Lord wherever we live, whatever our task. In fact, to pray "Thy kingdom come" is to pray "that Christ would rule in our hearts here" (WLC, Q/A 191)—note well: we pray that Christ, not merely the Son of God, but the Son of God as *the Incarnate*

Word, the Christ, the Redeemer and Savior—our Prophet, Priest, and King—that He would *rule* in our hearts *here*.

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our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. Because we belong to Him, Christ, by His Holy Spirit, assures us of eternal life and makes us "from the heart" willing and ready from now on to live for Him (Q/A 1). This means we no longer live our lives to ourselves, but live them with the aim that God in all His perfections may find in us a testimony and likeness. To be willing and ready means not to loathe but to love this purpose, not to oppose but work for its actualization—and this "from the heart" is under the lordship of Jesus Christ our Savior (not just God as our Creator). It is

only by a heart's willingness and readiness to live unto Him that God is honored, served, and praised, and that through *Christ*. This is what it means to belong to Christ—being not our own! He is Lord and Ruler of our whole being, our whole life, our whole purpose. His claims press as far as Satan's claims oppose Him and oppress and would master you.

Both Christ and the devil aim for hearts in order to reign there, for they each know that out of the heart "are the issues of life" (Prov. 4:23). The heart directs the whole person. It is fundamental: one's basic disposition toward God is a matter of the "heart." We need redemption and healing from the inside out, for the Bible teaches us that "The heart is devious above all else, and beyond cure—who can understand it? I the LORD test the mind and search the heart" (Jer. 17:9-10). Indeed, "the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). This is also why believers are urged, "Above all else, guard your heart" (Prov. 4:23). And this explains why our redemption includes the Lord renewing your hearts, putting His spirit within us, writing the law upon our hearts, so that He is our God and we are His people (Ezek. 36:26-28; cf. Psa. 51:7-11; Jer. 31:31). This is also why believers confess their sins in *thought, word, and deed*; they know their sins leave tracks over every area of their lives.

Jesus Christ lays claim to our hearts; there-

fore, He lays claim to our whole lives. When Christ reigns in our heart by His Word—the written, revealed Word of special revelation—we pursue a life of obedient gratitude in the whole of human life, at church in worship and fellowship around His Word, at work in the field or the laboratory, at play on the golf course or the bowling alley, in all of life, loving God first and neighbors as ourselves. It means we labor to see the church grow in faith and faithfulness, and numerically as well. It means we witness to our neighbors and are prepared to give an account for the hope that is in us; it means we labor to protect the environment since it is God’s creation and the dwelling place for ourselves and our neighbors and the means by which God provides for us; it means we care about social justice because human beings are very adept and deceptive about the ways they abuse one another and are cruel to one another. It means that we seek to discover the mysteries latent in the creation, for in this way we may improve human life under God’s providential care and as believers in Christ can give Him praise for the vast and varied complexities and beauties of His creation. It means all this and more.

We do our best, knowing victory belongs to the Lord alone, and that in His good time. We do not, however, abandon the field to the enemy, not if we are able to resist and obey the Lord by showing something of His healing reign in Christ Jesus (again, frail though it be). The enemy doesn’t abandon the field to us. We press the claims of Christ upon the creation that belongs to Him. We don’t concede it to the enemy who is a usurper, who arrogates to himself that which is not rightfully his. Satan is not Creator and Lord of the universe. He is a pretender on the throne! We do not, as Christ’s people, declare war for human hearts against the devil, using the gospel, while allowing Satan to lay claim over public life, over cultural affairs, over education, and science, and art, and politics, etc., laying down the sword of the Spirit. No! *If we can*, we resist and aim to press Christ’s healing reign into the cracks and crevices of life, where sin hides and works its damage. So, *if we can*, we enter public life: in education, business, political spheres, etc., for D-Day has come; V-Day awaits!

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Therefore, in the interval between D-Day and V-Day, believers may not barricade the ethics of the kingdom of God behind the walls of Christian fellowship, no more than they may treat life in its panoply of responsibilities and tasks as belonging only to God’s sovereignty (His kingdom of power) but not to His reign of redemption (the kingdom of God). Believers may not (and may not think to) disunite themselves from Christ and disown His lordship when they leave the sanctuary on Sunday.

As it was noted in the first article in this series, Scripture teaches us about two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness, God’s redemptive kingdom in the Seed of the woman and Satan’s kingdom of rebellion in the seed of the serpent. Scripture speaks this way because “kingdom” language refers to a reign which lays claim to persons in all that they are and all that they do, and so in that sense God’s kingdom (God’s reign of redemption and fellowship *in Christ*) also lays claim to places, vocations, talents, abilities, resources, yes, everything. Such is God’s claim upon those united to His Son through the Holy Spirit in the way of faith. Such is also Satan’s aim: to lay claim to God’s image-bearers so that they walk in rebellion against God in the whole of their persons and being. No area of life is to be left unadulterated. The devil therefore aims to tear everything into rags—even the creation itself is subjected to ruin inasmuch as God’s image-bearers are turned into rebels against Him.

As observed in the second article, Colossians 1:13 depicts believers as translated from one kingdom to the other, for they have been transferred from the reign of Satan to the reign of Jesus Christ, their Redeemer. This is a comprehensive claim and permits no two-ruler alternative. After all, Satan’s former claim upon believers wasn’t limited to a spiritual sphere wherein he only sought to prevent them from coming under the church’s official ministry of Word and sacrament. Most certainly he wages a mighty war against anyone hearing and believing the gospel; but his reign (kingdom) of darkness over people’s lives is not limited to those matters. No, he seeks to ruin humans in total deception, to distort and corrupt all that they do: in artistic aspirations and scientific explorations, in their business practices and economic policies, in their political goals/methods and social mores, in their marital and familial relationships, at work and at play, everything!, in order to turn every aspect of life against God and to foment enmity between human beings—to place them at each other’s throats. The devil aims to reign over all our thinking and imagination (that is why we must “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ”—2 Cor. 10:4 NIV).

The scope of the kingdom of God is a matter of the heart, which directs all of life. Jesus Christ, who redeems us by His blood, is King; therefore He claims our hearts, and in so doing He claims all of life.

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