

REFORMED PATHWAYS

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

The Kingdom of God—Part 2

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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 that connection we also outlined some aspects of the doctrine of the church as it relates to the kingdom of God. Then we began to look at how the idea of the kingdom of God was manifest at creation and lost with the fall.

In the second part of this survey, we now arrive at the period of redemption, where the Lord embarks upon the work to reestablish the kingdom of God—that is, to regain His reign of fellowship through His redemptive and healing rule over the estranged and broken creation. This finds its focus in God's fallen image-bearers, but, as we shall see, finally embraces the entire scope of God's creation.

The Kingdom of God and Redemption

In speaking of redemption, the Gospel writer, John, tells us that “the Word became flesh”—the Word by whom all things were made, the Word who is from the beginning, the Word who was with God and is God (John 1:1-3). This Word is the Seed of the Woman who brings light into the darkness. He grants to us “grace upon grace” from His own fullness. “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). In and through Him God brings to fulfillment the great work of liberation, signaled in the re-establishment of His kingdom. In the Person of Jesus Christ the decisive battle is waged against Satan and his demons, and the decisive victory realized. Jesus Christ is, then, the kingdom's center point and apogee; He is its embodiment and its instrument, for He proclaims the kingdom, inaugurates the kingdom, and is King of the kingdom.

PROCLAIMING THE KINGDOM

First Jesus Christ proclaims the kingdom. In the Gospel of Mark, the first gospel words we hear from Jesus' mouth are, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Of first importance here is to see that the kingdom requires repentance and faith; indeed, repentance and faith go together. The one minus the other is like a guitar without strings, but together they strum a melody of praise and service to God. Repentance is a turning from sin, while faith is a turning to the Lord. Thus Jesus' grand announcement of the time being fulfilled, the kingdom at hand is itself the kingdom's manifestation; the proclamation of the kingdom brings with it the blessings of the kingdom: release from bondage and brokenness and the conferring of freedom and healing. This is nothing less than a movement from accursedness and enmity to blessedness and friendship. The kingdom of God is at hand. The proclamation of the gospel is its first manifestation and its first healing effects.

THE INAUGURATION OF THE KINGDOM

When Jesus declares that the kingdom is at hand or imminent, he means that it is now in our midst,

crashing like a wave upon the shores of the world and sweeping out to sea that which presents an obstacle to its righteous cause. The kingdom centers on His own Person. This means that the kingdom has arrived. It does not mean, however, that it is fully arrived or that it is fully manifest in its life-restoring perfection. Nonetheless, the kingdom, in the Person of Jesus Christ, and His proclamation of it, brings forth a decisive fulfillment; the time has arrived! The “at-handedness” of it simply means that it awaits the fullness of Jesus' ministry as Mediator: His cross, His resurrection, His ascension, His session. But in principle the kingdom has come, is coming, and will continue to come till His return in the flesh. If one insists, we may speak of the kingdom of God as on the threshold during the period of Jesus' earthly ministry, though that ministry is itself taken up into what the kingdom is. Thus Jesus' preaching, along with all His other works—the miraculous signs and healings—are manifestations of the kingdom of God, for they are manifestations of the healing, redemptive, fellowship restoring reign of God on the earth.

This isn't to suggest that the kingdom of God did not exist in any form during the period of the Old

Testament. But it is to suggest that the kingdom of God as manifest in the Old Testament only finds reality in Jesus Christ, and until the coming of Jesus Christ the time is unfulfilled. The kingdom of God in the Old Testament is a mere pre-figuration, a sketch or shadow that awaits the reality. That reality, Jesus Christ and all His redemptive blessings, is what casts the shadow back upon the history of the old covenant era. He is what is sketched for us in the Old Testament, and the One in whom the people of God in the Old Testament placed their faith through the promises. In other words, in Christ's coming (the definitive arrival of the Seed of the woman) the blessings of the former age are actually empowered and find their truth. The promises of God in the Old Testament reach their consummation in Jesus Christ, so that God's people in the time of the old covenant, because and in anticipation of Christ's redemptive work, may properly be regarded as His people, recipients of His benefits and blessings. So, to speak more technically, the kingdom of God was proleptically present in the Old Testament. But now the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand. The longed for and long-hoped for coming of the kingdom of God—its decisive and victorious coming—arrives in the Person of

Jesus Christ and His work.

Noteworthy is that He proclaims “the gospel of God,” for this kingdom, because of the fall, is redemptive in nature, issuing in the healing and fellowship-restoring reign of God over life. Thus in casting out demons by the Spirit of God, Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God has come upon us (Matt. 12:28). In the healing of the sick the kingdom of God has come near (Luke 10:9, 11). Most definitively, in building the church—a saved and forgiven humanity in the way of rebirth and renewal—the kingdom is manifest as a present reality (cf. John 3:5).

THE KING OF THE KINGDOM

Naturally, Jesus Christ is the King of the kingdom of God. However, Matthew’s Gospel shows us that the keys of the kingdom are administered by the church in the Lord’s visible absence (Matt. 16:19). The keys show us the church’s principal responsibility and its most weighty duty. The church in its institutional form and empowered and indwelt by the Holy Spirit seeks to administer faithfully these keys according to the Word of God. The kingdom-keys are the preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline toward repentance (see HC, Q/A 83). The church as believers dispersed out into the world, pursuing their vocations and interacting with those who are citizens of the kingdom of the devil, likewise live under the kingship of Christ (our Redeemer). Christ’s kingship extends over all of life, for his kingdom comes to reclaim and bring back into service to the Father the whole creation and all of life. This side of glory, of course, the extent and permanency of this will be precarious and fluctuating, unstable and inconsistent. In other words, it will vary from place to place; and just as the church itself flourishes for a time in a given time and setting and then atrophies and shrinks (sometimes even vanishes), so the obedience that Christians render to Christ in the wider cultural affairs of life varies from time and setting. There is no steady line of ascent in building the body of Christ, the church, or in the church as believers dispersed into the world living obediently to Christ in the whole of life’s dimensions. Missteps, false starts, good beginnings with bad endings often characterize the Christian life in its broader and narrower forms. In the narrower form of the Christian life lived within the community of believers—in corporate worship, Bible study, prayer and fellowship under the Word—sanctification is usually slow and marked by both progress and regress; we make blunders but also

show improvements. Likewise the Christian life lived, beyond this gathered community, in the broader public arena is marked by advancement and by retreat, by Christ honoring conduct and Christ dishonoring behavior. We see this in our marriages, in our efforts to be godly parents; we see it in our labors to be good neighbors and responsible employers or employees, in running a business according to biblical principles and the moral dictates of Scripture, in educating our children in the Lord, in recreational pursuits, and the like.

We see, then, that when Scripture speaks of the kingdom of God it finds its first focus in the church. The church is the kingdom’s redemptive fruit manifest in a congregation of believers who worship the Lord together and mutually seek to edify one another. This portrait, however, is not the whole picture of the kingdom of God. We need to examine other portions of Scripture to fill out this portrait, for God’s kingdom extends, finally, as far and wide as the whole creation, a creation which belongs to Him as its Creator but which must come under His healing reign once more.

Of particular interest is Colossians 1:13-29. We begin with verses 13 and 14. The apostle here presents a summary exposition of the salvation that is ours in Christ. “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” The two aspects of our salvation mentioned here are significant: a deliverance or rescue from one thing, “the power of darkness,” and a transference to another thing, “the kingdom of his beloved Son.” We have moved from citizenship in one country to another. We have been saved from the savage dominion of Satan to the liberating dominion of Christ, the Son of God’s love. This is our new (and true) status as sons and daughters of God. We have been “rescued” and we have been “transferred.” We are under the kingship of Jesus Christ, defined as “redemption” (purchased and set free from the bondage of sin) and “the forgiveness of sins” (liberated from the curse of the law and reckoned righteous in the Redeemer).

This is just to say that Jesus Christ is “Lord” or “King”—that is, the Savior is the King. Now, this side of Christ’s resurrection and ascension, believers rightly see the Lord’s reign in ascendancy, and that through the redemptive power of His grace. The Lord who announced the arrival (in the fullness of time) of God’s kingdom makes its reality ongoing. God reigns not just providentially as Creator, but in Christ He reigns redemptively, restoring life and fellowship. The divine Savior rescues us from the dark dominion so that we may be transferred to His royal dominion, His kingship. We no longer belong to the old country, the land of our bondage, suffering Satan’s tyranny. We have come home, at last! Better, we have been brought home. We are saved and live under His dominion, the kingdom of the Beloved of the Father.

As children of royalty we possess riches immeasurable. However, as I’ve heard it said, “most of the wealth is in promissory notes. The ‘inheritance of the saints in light’ (vs. 12) is something they have as promises in the book rather than as cash in hand. But the things we already have are named in verse 14: ‘We have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.’” Our sins constitute rebellion against God and reveal our bondage. Because of our sins Satan claims ownership of us. Sin marks us as no longer God’s children but slaves of a cruel master. But when sin is forgiven, we experience redemption; we are bought and paid for ... and set free! To be children or citizens of the kingdom of God is to know this liberation; and it testifies to all the other treasures that form our inheritance.

Next the Apostle expands on who Christ is as God’s Royal and Beloved Son. In Colossians 1:15-20 we are given one of the most magnificent descriptions of Christ in the New Testament. The image of Christ exalted, sitting down at the right hand of His Father—His session—is a gloriously biblical portrait of Christ resurrected and ascended. As such, He, having sent His Spirit to us, intercedes for us and carries forth His redemptive work, attentive to our needs and burdens. These verses, however, show us even more than what is contained in the above description: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

These words are reminiscent of the opening verses of John's Gospel. Christ is here described as "the image of the invisible God," "the firstborn of all creation," the One by whom "all things were created" (vs. 15)—whether visible or invisible, whether this physical world or the spiritual world, whether earth or heaven, whether earthly thrones or spiritual dominions, "*all things* were created through him and for him" (vs. 16; italics added). We will come back to this below.

Christ is before all things (vs. 17). An eternity before His incarnation and sacrificial death, He existed with God (also see John 1:1). When God created the heavens and the earth, when He spoke its formation into being, Christ was the almighty divine speech that brought everything into existence. All powers and ranks are subservient to Him and for Him. All things hold together in Him. He integrates and orders all things. He is the coherence of all things. He gives meaning and sense to the universe.

Moreover, Christ, the firstborn of creation is also "the head of the body, the church" (vs. 18a). When a people of God had evaporated from the earth, this Seed of the Woman restores and remakes a new humanity. He takes the decaying creation, under curse, and suffers the damnation that is due. He takes on our human creatureliness and our guilt; He suffers our decomposition; He goes to the cross with its forsaken banishment; and there He submits to the divine judgment, to the outer darkness, to the weeping and gnashing of teeth. Cursed, forsaken, and dead! And then He beats back death's curse, rising in victory, and ushers forth a new "beginning"—that is, "He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead" (vs. 18b). Therefore He gives new life and will one day usher in a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21:1). Emerging from the rot of death and damnation, He is the beginning of a new creation, and He reorders life wherein He "in everything" has the preeminence (vs. 18c).

This is as it should be, for this is the restoration of the kingdom of God. This is the reestablishment of God's reign of truth and fellowship, to His glory and for our joy. This is bringing to fullness what had been short-circuited and circumvented with the fall. This must be so lest God's cause suffer defeat. Remember, all things were created through Him and for Him. There is no part of the created order that wears the label "Not for Christ," declaring to Him, "hands off!" In reestablishing God's healing reign of fellowship and obedience,

Christ reclaims what is rightfully His—the whole creation! Therefore, Jesus Christ, God's beloved, inasmuch as He alone is able to accomplish this task, is alone worthy to receive the preeminence. "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (vs. 19). This shows us that it is a mistake to reduce the redemptive work of Christ to a matter of personal salvation. Christ's rescue of His people from eternal death, of course, is not to be minimized or disparaged in the least. But personal salvation is an incomplete and truncated conception of Christ's saving project. Christ's work of redemption is cosmic in dimension, taking the whole creation into its arms—encompassing things visible and invisible, including the reconciliation of all things to Himself (vs. 20). All power and authority belong to Him. He brings the peace. He ushers in the new regime of the kingdom of God. He is the head of a new human-

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ity, His church. He must have the preeminence.

Not surprisingly, Christ's preeminence first comes to expression in His church. That is where it is first acknowledged and confessed and celebrated. The church, after all, is the firstfruits and first recipients of His saving blessing. This is why the Apostle continues by saying: "And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him..." (vss. 21-22). It has been said: "In the life of the Christian and in the patterns of the church, the reordering of the world is beginning to be realized. Here, in these lives and in this community—the church—Christ again has the preeminence." And, returning to verse 16, to the words, "all things were created through him and for him," we see that the preeminence of Christ must shine forth from all things. All things were created for Him. Nothing is to be forfeited! Therefore we must not prune Christ's victory to a nub, or conceive of His triumph as the gathering of a few scraps, a small collection of saved souls, called the church. That

is terribly mistaken. Christ's saviorship and kingdom restoring lordship begin with the church, indeed, with redemption, the forgiveness of sins (vs. 14), but ends with the reconciliation of all things to himself (vs. 20).

Given this great reality, we can soberly, in faith and dependence upon the Lord, move out into the world first to disciple the nations and second to reflect Christ's lordship as far as the curse is found. The second project is no less difficult, and no more triumphalistic, than the first. The priority of the first, the great commission, ought not to be doubted. But, then, granted that, the second ought not to be discouraged or yielded. Since Christians across this globe live in very diverse socio-economic and socio-political circumstances, it is not possible to prescribe a "one-size-fits-all model" for service to the Lord, reflecting Christ's kingship in the civic or non-ecclesiastical domains of life. But home, marriage, education, government, recreation, life in its plurality of vocations, the arts, etc., do not escape the "all things" of Colossians 1. Life in its comprehensive scope does not break free from Christ's royal, redemptive claims. "All things were created through Him and for Him." He came to reconcile all things to Himself. And, therefore, as citizens of Christ's kingdom enter the world, they follow a mandate to warn lost people of their estrangement from God and perilous state. By proclamation, God's church bears witness to the love of Christ, by persuasion they aim to become all things to all people, that they might by all means save some (1 Cor. 9:22), and by service and action to establish righteousness and peace in every sector of life—yes, every valid branch of learning, every legitimate field of business or trade, every sphere of human responsibility.

This vision of the Christian in the world has in the more recent history of Reformed thinking sometimes devolved into a kind of crude triumphalism, wherein it is thought that because Christians are active in a given field of labor, their participation as such "Christianizes" it and renders it obedient to Christ. This idea is quite mistaken as it stands. In fact, matters are much more difficult and complicated than that. Christians engaging in the wider domain of life discover that progress here is meager, just as meager as their individual Christian lives are meager in sanctification. Yet at the same time, progress, though meager, is not a charade. As the Heidelberg Catechism reminds us, although "in this life even the holiest [persons] have only a small beginning of this obedience,"

that is, obedience to the Ten Commandments, “nevertheless, with all seriousness of purpose,” those converted to God “do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God’s commandments” (Q/A 114). The Ten Commandments, then, serving as the believers’ guide to thankful Christian living, not only to remind us how sinful we are and how much we must seek our salvation in Christ alone, [they] also call us to “never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God’s image, until after this life we reach our goal: perfection” (HC, Q/A 115; cf. Westminster Larger Catechism, Qs/As 97, 99, 149). Thus, Christ’s lordship is to manifest itself in the whole of our lives, for the Ten Commandments infiltrate every area of life—nothing may be god to us or have our heart’s allegiance as god except God alone.

The “Already” and “Not Yet” of the Kingdom

At this point it might serve us well to pause to consider another point of bewilderment surrounding the idea of the kingdom’s present arrival. If the kingdom has come, how can it be yet to come? If it is now present, how can it also be future? Indeed, what does it mean for us to pray for the kingdom to come? How do we answer such questions?

In brief form, the scriptural answer, I think, is to say that the kingdom of God is inaugurated—meaning, it has arrived in part (see Matt. 12:28; 21:31; Rom. 14:17)—but it is yet to reach its pinnacle and consummation (see 1 Cor. 14:17; Luke 12:32). The “now” or “already” of the kingdom of God is reflected wherever the healing and redemptive reign of God is gaining ascendancy—the church being exhibit front and center. The “not yet” of the kingdom is why we continue to pray for the healing reign of God to come. Thus the kingdom is here now. But it is not here in its fullness, in all of its healing scope, in its completeness, in its consummate state.

This has a significant connection to what the Bible teaches us about “this age” and “the age to come.” In Matthew 12:32, Jesus speaks about “this age” and “the age to come.” This age refers to the world under the regime of darkness and Satan’s tyranny. The age to come refers to the world under the regime of Christ and consummated glory. This age is set in contrast to the glory that awaits God’s sons and daughters—i.e., the age to come. This age is a battleground; the age to come is a sanctuary of peace and fellowship with God. This age brings assault upon God’s reign; the age to come is the full manifestation and victory of the reign of God. This age is ungodly and evil and therefore perishing (Gal. 1:4; Eph. 2:2; 2 Cor. 4:4); the age to come is righteousness and grace and therefore brings eternal life (Rom. 5:21). Eternal life belongs to the age to come, as does the kingdom of God. The decisive and final end of this age therefore arrives cataclysmically with Judgment Day, which in turn issues forth in the age to come, a new heaven and a new earth (see Matt. 13:39, 43, 49, 50; Rev. 19; 20).

But if the kingdom belongs to the age to come, how is it correct to speak of the kingdom of God as already here? Scripture answers this question by showing us how God folds the future back into the present, so to speak, so that already now, in this age of wickedness, the age to come is revealed. Sometimes the Bible refers to this as firstfruits (Rom. 8:23; James 1:18; Rev. 14:4); sometimes it speaks in definitive terms about salvation, so that, for example, believers are described as new creations even though they dwell in a perishing world and struggle against an old nature (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15); they are already justified and reconciled to God (Rom. 3:28; 5:1, 9; 1 Cor. 6:11; Titus 3:7); they are already adopted as children of God (John 1:12; Gal. 3:26; 1 Thess. 5:5); and they are already indwelt by the Spirit (Acts 2:4; Rom. 8:9; 1 Pet. 4:14). They already have eternal life (John 3:16; Rom. 6:23; 1 John 5:11, 13). Each of these blessings is a kind of folding back of the future into the present. Nonetheless, the old age (this age) still holds on. Believers therefore are not yet fully sanctified (1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 4:3, 7; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 1:15, 16); they have not yet put on the blessedness of eternal life (Gal. 6:8; Titus 3:7; Jude 1:21); they are not yet home (2 Cor. 5:6; Phil 1:23); they are not yet delivered from the battle (1 Tim. 1:18; 6:12; Eph. 6:10-18), even as the world, God’s creation, awaits redemption and the revealing of the sons and daughters of God. Creation awaits the final victory of Jesus Christ, for it experiences the “not yet” of His triumph (Rom. 8:19-22). This is what some NT scholars have called the presence of the future, the barging in of the kingdom of God into this old regime of darkness. It is the existence of “the age to come” in “this age,” a foretaste of what awaits us and the rest of God’s creation. It is the firstfruits of a rich, ripe, abundant, and glorious harvest that is sure to come.

To borrow an illustration, the difference between firstfruits and harvest may be likened to the difference between D-Day and V-Day. On June 6, 1944, the Allied forces invaded the German stronghold on the beaches of Normandy. This was D-Day, and in breaking through the German defenses the war for Germany was lost and the victory for the Allies assured. However, it took another eleven months of fierce fighting before the Germans laid down their arms, which they did on May 5, 1945. That was V-Day, Victory Day. D-Day anticipated and paved the way for V-Day. Similarly, with the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh the time is fulfilled; He ushers in God’s healing kingship—proclaiming the good news to the poor, making the blind see and the deaf hear, delivering captives from Satan’s bondage, and scandalizing those who would not believe (Matt. 11). This is D-Day. The cross and resurrection dealt the devil and his kingdom the fatal blow; victory is now assured. But there is still a fierce fight to wage. Indeed, the church is sent into the world to fight the good fight of the faith. The church is sent with the keys of the kingdom of God, which open kingdom doors to believers and close them to unbelievers. V-Day commences with the second coming of Christ, which includes the final judgment of the living and the dead, the new heaven and the new earth, and the perfection of Christ’s bride as the New Jerusalem. Truly, then, the kingdom of God will have come in the fullest sense and in the most complete way.

The Lord willing, next time, in our last installment we will address the question of the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God and the implications of this vision of the kingdom for the Christian in the world.

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