

THE KINGDOM OF GOD
ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE

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PART ONE

Last year I had the opportunity to speak to you on the subject of "Christian Education in Home, Church and School." This morning I have the high privilege of addressing this gathering at your Academic Convocation.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ I greet you--esteemed professors, committed students, highly respected Board of governors and friends of Seminario Juan Calvino--with the fervent prayer that this may be a rich and spiritually rewarding season as you pursue your work for him whose we are and whom we serve.

Here, to use a term common north of the border, you are called "to do theology." And theology, rightly conceived, is not an occasion for human theorizing and speculation; it is rather a calling to think the thoughts of our God after him or, to put this into the words of the apostle, "we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (II Cor. 10:5b). Only so can your work be to the glory of his sovereign grace in Christ Jesus and thus for the upbuilding of his church, for the ingathering of his people and for the coming of God's kingdom among men.

This task, while calling for diligent application of your mental capacities, is much more than an intellectual exercise. It is an act of devotion, an exercise in piety, a commitment of heart and life to the Savior whom we confess to be our true and only life.¹ We are his dear children, heirs of all the riches of salvation and therefore also citizens and soldiers of the kingdom of our God.

With delight, then, I address you on the subject of the kingdom of God as revealed in Holy Writ.

This topic was not of my choosing. It was selected for me by your esteemed professors. And when first it was received, let me confess this publicly, I looked for every possible excuse to decline the invitation. This theme is so rich, so varied and so profound that I felt completely inadequate to do it the justice which it deserves. It has been the object of study, of intense discussion and debate more than any another biblical topic, for over one hundred fifty years. Volumes, each one often contradicting those written just before, have poured from German and French, from English and Dutch presses in uncounted numbers.² How could I, in the face of such scholarship, be able to deal with this theme as it deserves?

The invitation at first seemed to imply that, as last year, this would be done in three addresses. And knowing in my conscience that I neither could nor dared decline, it seemed appropriate to divide the material into three sections:

1. the kingdom of God concept according to the Bible;
2. the kingdom of God concept as developed in the churches by some of its teachers and philosophers;
3. the kingdom of God concept as it is to take shape in the day-by-day life of those who truly belong to it.

This morning I restrict myself to the first. Not only is this proper; in view of conflicting and contradictory views it is urgent in our time when many unbalanced and false notions of that kingdom are widely propagated. Without a firm grasp on the biblical teachings concerning the kingdom, we again substitute man's thoughts and theories for the Word of God which alone lives and abides forever.

Therefore, for your reflection and response let us review the material step by step as follows:

1. the announcement of the kingdom in the Gospels, especially by our Lord,³

2. the roots of the kingdom concept as revealed throughout the Old Testament, and
3. the teaching of the kingdom concept by the apostles in the rest of the New Testament.

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What an amazing and astounding impression our Lord made on his hearers when, having returned to Galilee from a first year of ministry in Judea and Jerusalem, he began to preach.

Listen to the record of Matthew: after John the Baptizer was put in prison, Jesus left Nazareth for Capernaum. "From that time on Jesus began to preach. 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'" (Matt. 4:17).⁴ And again, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom" (Matt. 4:23).

Does it surprise you that we begin with this rather than with the Old Testament? It should not. Especially the synoptics (the first three Gospels) are rich and replete with this message. Only in its light can we look back with appreciation and some understanding of its Old Testament roots as these are uncovered especially in the Psalms and the Prophets. Nor will the teachings of the apostles on this subject, somewhat brief and incidental when compared with the Gospels, become transparent for us. For these men, according to the mandate given by Jesus, were to ". . . go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20a).

Like a symphony poem, with all its variations in major and minor keys, this teaching of the kingdom of God--or as it is frequently called in Matthew "the kingdom of heaven"--brings the words and deeds of our Lord into an impressively beautiful and unmistakable unity. Jesus came, indeed, preaching in season and out the good news of the kingdom.

Small wonder that the Jews of his day listened to him gladly. Echoes of his words reverberated at once in their

minds and hearts. In readings from the Old Testament at every Sabbath service they heard about this divinely-promised reality. That promise had cheered the Israelitish hearts as they longed for better days than they were often experiencing. They heard what Moses and David, what Amos and Micah, what Isaiah and Jeremiah and Daniel and the rest had foretold centuries before.

For them this message was not strange because of what had happened immediately before our Lord appeared in their synagogues and streets. Many who now heard him were among those multitudes who had streamed from Jerusalem, Judea and Galilee to listen to John the Baptizer in the wilderness.

That man had been sent by God as the forerunner, the "herald" to prepare the way before the Lord as the long-awaited Messiah and King. This he did faithfully, even while not fully grasping the glory of the message which he brought.

Mark, often regarded whether rightly or wrongly as the first Gospel writer,⁵ begins his record strikingly:

The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. [Then after quoting from Isaiah, he adds,] And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. . . .And this was his message: 'After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit' (Mark 1:4-8).

So significant was this ministry of John that all four evangelists record it in some detail. No, this wilderness preacher did not speak directly about the kingdom of God. That was not the central focus of his mission and message. Rather, his was the solemn privilege of announcing that the kingdom was at hand; that it would soon appear in Jesus of Nazareth. But to that end, in order that they might be prepared, his hearers were summoned to a change of heart, mind and life.

Long had the Jewish people suffered under the oppressive yoke of Roman tyranny. With a yearning more intense than we can imagine they looked back to the golden days when David and Solomon occupied the throne. They remembered that, according to the prophetic word, One was to come who would ascend that throne of his father David and rule his people with righteousness and peace. But now, steeped in some two centuries of Jewish apocalyptic writings, they longed for an earthly, a visible, a political kingdom.⁶ This they believed would be established by violence. The oppressors would be overcome, and as God's chosen people they would enjoy unimaginable prosperity. For them, after the fashion of a few fanatic Anabaptists in Reformation times and also of some liberation theologians in our day, these Jews thought of the promised Messiah as the One who would change the structures of their society.

John's message, however, stood in sharp contrast to such expectations. In preparing the way before the coming King he commanded a change of individual hearts and lives. Men, women and even children, whether religious leaders or disloyal tax-collectors, all needed to repent of their sins. As a discernible sign of such a change they were to submit to the baptism of cleansing and bring forth fruits worthy of repentance and faith.

Thus the kingdom of God in its appearance among men would exercise a sifting power. It was, to be sure, good news but only for those who experienced a spiritual change. In his sermons John warned them that the axe already lay at the root of the tree of their life. Every tree which did not bring forth the desired fruit would be cut down and burned with fire. The One whose appearance was at hand would come with a fan in his hand. He would thoroughly cleanse his threshing floor, separating the chaff from the good and wholesome grain. Such a view of the kingdom of God in its coming was the new and shocking note for the Jews, one which especially the Scribes and Pharisees rejected out of hand.

By means of such words John sought to draw the people away from their fanciful dreamings. Not all the physical

descendants of Abraham would enter the kingdom; only those who heard and repented and believed. Echoes, indeed, of the Old Testament prophecies and promises but always with an intensely personal and existential challenge to all who listened.

Allow me to summarize briefly John's ministry as it prepared for the royal entrance of the kingdom with all its heavenly powers in the person and work of our Lord Jesus:

- a. The new day is at hand; already it is dawning on the horizon of Israel's history. Its place in redemptive history can hardly be overstated.
- b. This new order will be brought in by the King and demands of the people confessing and repenting of their sins.
- c. It also requires looking beyond John to Jesus of Nazareth. He is both Savior and King. All who turn to him in faith will be baptized with the Spirit and fire.
- d. Hence everyone without exception will be tested. Descent from Abraham is no guarantee of entrance into this realm.
- e. The coming of that kingdom is, indeed, good news. But it is incomplete without the stern warning to "flee from the wrath to come" (God's retributive justice). As King he will purge Israel and cast the unbelieving and unrepentant in the fire. In this way he will bring separation among those who hear his voice.

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This was also the kingdom-message brought by our Lord.

Already this is evident in his dealings with Nicodemus in the year before he came preaching throughout Galilee. Do you remember the story? To that ruler who came to him by night our Lord spoke about the kingdom. To him who seemed so well-versed in the Jewish religion, he said, "I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). When Nicodemus raises objections, Jesus adds, "I tell you the truth, unless a man is born

of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3:5-6).⁷

Already at this early stage in our Lord's ministry any notion of that kingdom appearing at once and in full external and glorious form is radically cut off. According to the eternal plan and purpose of God, whose is the kingdom, citizens must be made fit for that realm. These are the ones who hear and believe his words. They must be born again or anew or from above. Nor will the kingdom come, until the Son of man is lifted up on the cross, even as Moses raised the brazen serpent in the desert for the healing of those whose rebellion had doomed them to a sure and painful death (John 3:14). Only by the Spirit's work of creating a new birth which produces faith with all that accompanies it do men and women and children enter the kingdom of God.

All the rest of Jesus' teaching was a development, an embroidering if you will, of this theme of the kingdom of God.

We recognize this at once in that great message preached on the hillside of Galilee, usually called "The Sermon on the Mount" (Matt. 5-7). In it we find the "charter" of that kingdom. Its careful structure, its several parts and its challenge to those who heard, deserve our careful attention. A summary is not out of place at this point.

- a. It begins with designating the qualities or characteristics of those who are its citizens (Matt. 5: 3-12).
- b. It announces their responsibility in this world as salt and light and a city on a hill. Hence the kingdom is not some mystical reality hidden deep in people's souls. Its citizens are commanded to "let" the new light within them shine brightly to the praise of their Father in heaven (Matt. 5:13-16).
- c. It is intimately related to the Law, which our Lord never for a moment set aside. Yet it is of a higher order and bears a deeply spiritual character. Therefore he adds, ". . . unless your righteousness surpasses that

of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:17-20).

- d. It then continues by setting forth how God's will is to be pursued and practiced in everyday life by its citizens. All these examples stress a total spiritual surrender from the heart. Thus, too, they will not be forgiven, unless praying from the heart they forgive others (Matt. 5:23-6:18, 7:1-6).
- e. That "righteousness" of the kingdom must be the paramount goal in their lives. Hence they are not to seek the things of earth but "store up for yourselves treasures in heaven"; not to gain merit but rather to demonstrate the sincerity of their response to the gospel (Matt. 6:19-24). Nor are they to worry about their earthly needs. "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:33).
- f. It concludes with a challenge given by our Lord in several forms. Always they are to ask, seek and knock. They are to choose the "narrow" gate which alone leads to life. Against false prophets and teachers they must be on guard. Also they are to examine themselves for not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom. And the sermon ends with the striking parable of "The Wise and Foolish Builders" (Matt. 7:7-27).

In the synoptics we find the parables spoken by Jesus. Quite without exception each sustains a clear relationship to the good news of the kingdom. Matthew groups many of them together; Mark and Luke usually put them in their historical setting. But each stresses at least one basic aspect of the kingdom of God; all of them together give insight into "the knowledge of the kingdom,"⁸ a privilege given only to those who as disciples believe his Word (Matt. 13:13f.).

Time prevents us now from considering even a few of them in depth. But a cursory survey already demonstrates that in them the origin, the nature, the development, the challenge and the supreme value of this kingdom are made

clear. Even the consummation of that kingdom at the end of the ages receives attention.

For it men must be ready to sell all they possess. It appears in a world wherein wheat and tares grow up together until the final harvest (Matt. 13:24-30). At its inception in this day and age it is small. Yet like a mustard seed it grows into a large shrub or tree (Matt. 13:31-32). Even the hearing of the gospel gives no guarantee of salvation, that is, of entrance into the kingdom, as the parable of "The Net" declares. In it, bad as well as good fish are caught. But "at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous. . . ." (Matt. 13:47-50). In later parables our Lord taught that the kingdom would be taken away from the Jews to whom it was first promised, because of their willful unbelief and rejection of him as the Messiah-King (Matt. 21:33-36 and 22:1-14).

Were all the parables taken at face value as they have been recorded, scholars would not be spending so much of their time foolishly and vainly disputing questions which are, indeed, clearly answered.

Jesus undeniably proclaimed the kingdom of God as both a present reality which was "fulfilled" in his person and work while on earth and as a future hope not yet "consummated." This is the eschatological dimension which is assured by the Word of his Mediatorial power.

So, too, that kingdom breaks in upon human history at his coming, so that it "has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it" (Matt. 11:12).⁹ Yet its coming is also gradual and becomes all-pervasive like yeast within a lump of dough (Luke 13:20-21).

It is to be recognized first of all as a reign, an act of ruling, a "kingship" and not a territory which can be measured by man's instruments. But this dynamic kingdom of God does attain specific, concrete, visible manifestation in the lives of those who belong to it. It summons the hearers to the highest form of spiritual activity. And this will not go unnoticed in the present age.

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With this we address ourselves to the relationship between the miracles of our Lord and the kingdom of God.

These are no sleight-of-hand tricks accomplished with or without magical incantations. Rather, they are demonstrations that the kingdom comes with "the powers of the coming age" (Heb. 6:5). Not to be forgotten, although this is often too lightly done, the very preaching of the gospel unto salvation is a miracle; in fact, it is the great miracle of the kingdom. Hence the parable of "The Sower and the Seed" with its soul-searching challenge heads the list in Matthew's account (Matt. 13:1-23). But an intimate and unbreakable connection exists between his kingdom-message and the "mighty deeds and wonders" which he did. Already in the days of his humiliation he exercises that authority with which he was sent into the world. With it he was endowed by the Spirit's descent at the time of his baptism (Mark 1:9-11). Although subordinate and secondary to the Word--for the miracles proceeded from Jesus' own command--these deal with the physical, the earthly life of those to whom he stretched out his hands of compassion. Let me repeat: the gospel of the kingdom, although a profound spiritual and heavenly reality, transforms man in the totality of his existence. This includes the body with all its needs and wants. So too, he demonstrates his power to the glory of God in controlling creation and subduing the spirits who for so long exerted an enslaving and demonic power in the lives of many who lived in Jesus' day.

We see our Lord, then, turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11). We watch him as once again he breaks a few barley loaves and fish to still the hunger of the multitudes (Matt. 14:13-21; 15:29-39). We recognize him as Lord of the winds and waves in the stilling of the storms (Mark 4:35-41, 6:45-52). He can call upon legions of angels, although in obedience to the Father's will he refuses to frustrate the treachery of Judas and the violence of the soldiers who attempted to seize him in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:53). Even the angels of heaven are at his beck and call. He is the Savior-King who fully embodies and exercises

all the powers of the new age in the Kingdom of God.

Thus we follow our Lord during his earthly ministry. He heals the sick, opens the eyes of the blind, restores strength to the paralyzed limbs of the lame. He cleanses the lepers and restores them to a useful place in Israel's society from which their disease had banned them. A believing touch of the hem of his garment was sufficient to heal the woman whose issue of blood had plagued her for many years. Even the servant of Capernaum's centurion is saved from death by his word spoken from afar (Luke 7:1-10).

Greatest of all in our eyes is undoubtedly his gracious and glorious power over death. He raised Jairus' daughter by a few simple words (Mark 5:21-24, 35-43); the son of the widow of Nain by merely touching his coffin (Luke 7:11-17); Lazarus his friend, already three days in the tomb, by the command, "Come out" (John 11:38-44).

What purpose, we ask, did all these and many other miracles serve?

To be sure, they brought relief and release from sickness, sorrow and death in the lives of those on and for whom they were performed.

But far deeper do they show God's attestation that Jesus was his beloved Son, the One in whom he was well-pleased and through whom he was inaugurating and establishing his kingdom in men's hearts and lives. Peter sums this up admirably for the Jewish multitude in his Pentecost sermon. "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know." And with that the apostle summons to repentance and faith, "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord [that is, King] and Christ [that is, Messiah]" (Acts 2:22,36).

And all these deeds, together with his words of life, are to the praise and the glory of our God.¹⁰ To that end, above all, the kingdom of God makes its way powerfully in the world.

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Although the kingdom-promise is “fulfilled” in and with Jesus’ person and work done while on earth, it continually meets fierce opposition. No study of the kingdom of God concept will be correct, unless this is taken into serious account.

That opposition was already demonstrated at the birth of our Lord. While angels sang “on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14), wicked Herod was intent on his death. For Magi from the East had come to disturb all Jerusalem with their question, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east, and have come to worship him” (Matt. 2:2, 16-18). Much more personal and intense are the attacks, when Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. There the devil promises him, for one moment of homage, all the kingdoms of the world without the suffering and death which awaited him (Matt. 4:8; Luke 4:5-7). And with some show of external right could Satan make this promise, because by man’s rebellion all peoples and nations were enslaved under his control. Jesus does not hesitate to call him “the prince of this world” (John 16:11).

Under that demonic influence men in every walk of life, also in Jesus’ day, often heard and then resisted and rejected the call to kingdom-citizenship. Repeatedly our Lord drew out the distinction between those who believed and those who did not. The first are the sheep who hear his voice and follow him. They are safe for time and eternity. For them he freely lays down his life and will take it again (John 10:14-18). The others are the unruly goats who will be separated from his flock (Matt. 25:31-46). For them awaits eternal punishment.

Even more sharply does he tell the Pharisees, who preened with the pretension of being Abraham’s descendants and thus heirs of the kingdom, that they “belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of

lies" (John 8:44). Here the kingdom as the realm of God's truth is clearly marked off from the kingdom of darkness and death.

Those two "kingdoms" with all the battles which rise up between them continue through the ages. On this Jesus gave very clear indications in his teaching on "the last things" (Matt. 24:1-35; Mark 13:1-31; Luke 21:5-36).

This warfare, predicted as early as Genesis 3:15, continues between the eternal God and Satan at the head of the fallen angels. But involved in it is all mankind.

It is the battle for the truth against the lie, for that sound doctrine which is according to godliness against the lies perpetrated and propagated by false teachers who will everywhere abound during the season between the "fulfillment" and the "consummation" of the kingdom of God. Bound up with citizenship in the kingdom of heaven, therefore, is also repentance for believing the lie as well as for sinful practices. All this is integral to a living faith in Jesus Christ as "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

Is that warfare, then, an undecided issue, even though he "fulfilled" the promises of the kingdom by his life and death, in his resurrection and ascension?

By no means.

When the seventy returned from their mission with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name," he answered them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions, and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:18-20). Indeed, to them had been given some of "the powers of the age to come"; these, however, are of less importance than the salvation of which our Lord assures faithful servants. Thus when warning against worry, he encourages his disciples with the words, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). Already the

kingdom of God is, according to this word, a dynamic and present reality in the lives of those who trust him. And when the Pharisees accuse him of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub, he replies in a brief parable which points to himself. "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions, unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house" (Matt. 12:28-29; Luke 11:20-22).

Nothing in heaven or on earth or even under the earth can frustrate the kingdom of God with its heavenly powers. This is assured by our Lord's Word, as with them he left the upper room to be betrayed, "I have told you these things, so that in men you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

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Already we noticed that Jesus always spoke of the kingdom of God as being both present and future. And with regard to its future he had much to say to his disciples.

Only briefly will we touch on this aspect of the kingdom of God now. It should be evident from what was said earlier, that the "fulfillment" calls for the "consummation." Repeatedly he warned that judgment with eternal destruction awaits those who do not believe and obey the Word.

But from time to time the disciples asked the question, "When?" And to this our Lord gives no precise answer. Rather he repeatedly demands of them that they "watch" and "wait" and "occupy until he comes." Yet towards the close of his earthly ministry he does speak in greater detail about such matters. The parables give ample testimony to the fact that the kingdom of God, now that it has come among men, will not be restricted to the Jews. He has sheep, not belonging to the house of Israel, who are his and whom he will seek and find. When those cast out ". . . see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, south and take their places at the feast in the kingdom of

God" (Luke 13:28-29). This is the great victory celebration at the end of the ages to which he referred from time to time in his parables.

But before that "end" comes upon the world much must happen.

To this our Lord gave attention in response to the questions of his disciples. Here he speaks with much the same "prophetic perspective" so characteristic of the Old Testament messengers. The fall of Jerusalem because of its rejection of the Messiah is closely bound up with "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of sky, with power and great glory." The "signs" are enumerated at some length in the several Gospel accounts. And determinative among these is what he affirmed. "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14).

It should not be necessary for me to review all that our Lord said in connection with the end of world history. Later, mention will have to be made of this in connection with the preaching and teaching of the apostles. But again comes the call, "Watch out that no one deceives you." False teachers will abound. Wars and rumors of wars will proliferate. Famines and earthquakes will be the order of the day. Yet none of these cataclysmic events will, of themselves, lead men to repentance. Rather, witnesses to the gospel will be hated and persecuted and even put to death because of Christ. Wickedness will increase and the love of most people will grow cold.

Thus Jesus announced what would happen at his coming again. The dead, both the unrighteous and the godly, will be raised from their graves. He will manifest himself sitting on the place of judgment. All will receive as they have done in this life, whether unto eternal life or everlasting punishment. Only then will the old heaven and earth pass away.

But of that hour and day no man knows; not even the Son while on earth. Therefore the command comes to be wise and faithful servants, watching and waiting and obeying his commands.

All this is clearly bound up with Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God, as the parables which immediately follow in Matthew's account indicate. At that judgment, so we read, "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world'" (Matt. 25:34). But for those who have not believed and obeyed his word, "And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 25:30).

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Only one more aspect of our Lord's teaching needs to be added. It deals with the institution of the Lord's Supper. Here our concern will not be with different views of the "elements," a debate which raged in the days of the Reformation and is still relevant today. Nor will we discuss whether John gives it a different date than do the synoptics; much less will we discuss those debates on whether or not it was instituted while Jesus, with his disciples, celebrated the Passover. Our interest is in the close relationship which Jesus himself, according to the words recorded, draws between it and the kingdom of God.¹¹

The clearest and most detailed account we find in Luke's Gospel, although elements recorded elsewhere may not be ignored. For those who accept the Bible as completely trustworthy, the one may never be played over against the other as some scholars in more recent years have done.

Two issues are crucial here. Both must be considered to put this solemn Supper in its proper perspective.

The first is whether or not the expiatory death of our Lord from the beginning also determined its character. This has been denied by those who would see here only a "chabura," an eating and drinking of Jesus with his friends with a view to his early "parousia." And the Jews did have such table-fellowship both after the Passover and at other times. It was a time of great joy; one therefore in which the teaching of sin and atonement for sin would hardly find a suitable place.

The other question, closely related to it, is that of the function of the Lord's Supper in the coming of the kingdom as preached by Jesus.

Luke answers both of these questions clearly.

That it was connected with the commemoration of that glorious and divine deliverance of Israel by God out of Egyptian slavery can hardly be denied, if we take Luke's account as genuine. Several times the Passover is explicitly mentioned (Luke 22:7-8,11,13). Again, "When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table, And he said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer'" (Luke 22:14-15). We do the text injustice, if we ignore his emphasis on *this* Passover. It would be one different from, even while connected with, all the other Passovers in which he participated throughout his life. Indeed, no mention is specifically made of eating the bitter herbs and the roasted lamb, although the Passover lamb is mentioned together with the unleavened bread in the opening verse. But how is it possible to think of our Lord, who had come to fulfill all righteousness, as neglecting to make use of these elements while still calling it the Passover?

In this account, as well as in the other accounts, every word deserves the closest possible attention. Here, as someone has rightly remarked, all strands of the gospel of salvation are drawn together and woven into a seamless robe. We read of "the fruit of the vine," so frequently mentioned in the prophets as part of the joy in the coming kingdom. Jesus also speaks of "the new covenant in my blood," reminding us especially of the words of Jeremiah with its assurance of a new covenant in which God's law would be written on the hearts of his people. And that "blood" is poured out, as other writers have it, "for the remission of sins." This is the first and greatest of all gifts which are assured those who belong to the kingdom of heaven. All the other gifts and benefits flow from this source. Without this as the ground and foundation of salvation all teaching about the blessings of the kingdom of God are a resounding gong and a clanging cymbal. Let the liberals and the liberationists who at best ignore and at worst deny the substitutionary death of the

Savior on the cross be warned. Their promise is not that of a sure and coming kingdom; it is but a figment of their own imaginations and earthly ideals.

In connection with this Jesus speaks so clearly. Why did he so earnestly desire to eat this Passover with them? "For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God" (Luke 22:16). With emphasis he repeats this as the cup is passed around, "For I tell you I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (Luke 22:18).

Here it is evident beyond the shadow of a doubt that our Lord did not expect the kingdom to come in its fulness in his own time on earth. He looks ahead to the future as God's redemptive work will continue until the end of the age.

Let me summarize the significance of this eschatological emphasis in connection with the Lord's Supper in the words of Herman Ridderbos:

The great importance of this viewpoint is obvious, no doubt in the first place with respect to Jesus himself. Nowhere more impressively than here does it appear that he faced death in the certainty of his future exaltation. In his leavetaking and death he triumphantly awaits the messianic time. But at the same time, and this is significant for the characterization of the Lord's Supper, the meal Jesus partakes of with his disciples assumes a pre-figurative character. That which happens at this meal will be fulfilled in the kingdom of God. But also conversely, that which will be the fullness of joy in God's kingdom has its commencement and foretaste in this meal. The relation between the Eucharist and eating and drinking in the coming kingdom of God is not merely that between symbol and reality, but that between commencement and fulfillment. . . That is also why the meeting of the disciples at a meal for the time to come cannot be an accidental form of the bond of union which embraces them all and which is founded in their faith in Christ (412).

The time is now more than spent.

Forgive me that I have been able to deal with the wealth of material drawn from the Gospels in far too sketchy a fashion. Perhaps I have raised in your minds and hearts more questions than have been answered. But such a reaction and response is all to the good.

Today marks the beginning of your new academic year. May it be one in which study of and reflection on the biblical teaching concerning the kingdom of God will occupy its rightful place.

It is a message filled with challenge and comfort for all who name the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is the message which must be woven into all our preaching whether to believers who already confess themselves to be citizens by grace of that kingdom or to those yet outside whom God wills to call unto repentance and faith and godly obedience.

It is the message which resonates with the gospel throughout as it sings, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Rom. 11:36).

The Lord himself bless you one and all.

ENDNOTES

1. This emphasis is found clearly in John Calvin's opening statements in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* on "true and substantial wisdom" which is far more and deeper than intellectual investigation; the study of theology rightly engaged in is also an exercise in piety. Much the same emphasis can be found in several 17th century Reformed theologians who, as for example Voetius, combined the study of "doctrine" with that of "duty" (ethics) and "ars practica" or devotion, godliness, piety. This emphasis should be recaptured in every theological school to prevent the study of Christian doctrine from becoming impersonal, abstract and hence spiritually sterile.

2. A bibliography on important articles, pamphlets and books dealing with "the kingdom of God" would fill dozens of pages. For those in the audience interested in pursuing a study of this theme, I suggest the following as especially helpful and trustworthy:

Louis Berkhof, *The Kingdom of God: The Development of the Idea of the Kingdom, especially since the Eighteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951).

George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, [reprint] 1981).

Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, translated by H. de Jongste (St. Catharines, ON: Paideia Press, 1978).

Gerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom and Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951; [First published by the American Tract Society, New York]).

3. Because of time limitation this address deals only with the kingdom of God as found in the synoptics; other biblical materials are reserved for later scheduled addresses.
4. All biblical quotations are from the New International Version of the Holy Bible (New York: International Bible Society, 1978).
5. The question (problem) of the relation among the first three Gospels, the synoptics, need not concern us here. For those who endorse the Reformed confession concerning Holy Scripture, each of these is equally authoritative, reliable and therefore necessary for our faith in the person, teaching and work of our Lord Jesus Christ.
6. On the character and influence of Jewish apocalyptic views, many of them undoubtedly current among the leaders and people of the Jews in the days of our Lord, cf. G. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 76-101. He summarizes his findings thus:

The apocalyptic eschatology can be understood as a historical development of the prophetic eschatology as the latter is interpreted against the background of the historical evils of the post-Maccabean times. Both prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology can conceive of the establishment of the Kingdom only by an inbreaking of God; both are essentially catastrophic. . . However, apocalyptic eschatology has lost the dynamic concept of God who is redemptively active in history. The apocalyptists, contrary to the prophets, despaired of history, feeling that it was completely dominated by evil. . . Thus the prophetic tension between eschatology and history was lost. God is alone the God of the future; he is God of the present only in a theoretical sense. . .(101).

7. This text is absolutely crucial for a correct understanding of salvation as our new life in Christ, one which leaves no room for the "easy believe-ism" characteristic of some evangelical circles. Faith is always productive of good works; (cf. the epistle of James, etc.). Justification as God's gracious gift to all who believe may not for a moment be isolated from his gracious work of sanctification. Here Jesus warns against the legalism, the externalizing of the requirements of God's will or law for his children who as kingdom-citizens are to submit wholeheartedly to doing what he demands of them, a "doing" which can be and is accomplished (be it yet imperfectly) by relying on his sustaining and renewing grace. Cf. esp. H. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 285-333.
8. On the "mystery of the kingdom," cf. G. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 218-242.
9. The proper translation and therefore interpretation of this text has been much discussed and debated. The middle voice of the verb used by Jesus can be translated as a passive (something done to the kingdom) or as an active, a reflexive. Thus Ridderbos:

There is no certainty about the way to translate this text but it cannot be denied that the kingdom of heaven is here represented as a present entity. According to our translation it is pushing its way, is asserting itself with force, using violence in this world. And this has been going on (the process is being continued) "since the days of John the Baptist." We shall have to understand the word "since" in an exclusive and not in an inclusive sense. John is on the threshold, he leads from the old to the new dispensation; he himself still belongs to the old period. With Jesus the new era has come, that of the kingdom of heaven pushing its way with force into the world. Conversely it is also a question of "appropriating," "taking" the kingdom "as a booty" (54).

Moreover, the expression "the kingdom of heaven has been taken by force" in Matthew 11:12, should not merely be taken to refer to the power of the preaching of the gospel, as some authors do in their too close adherence to the *euaggelizetai* of Luke 16:16, for it also relates to Jesus' miracles. . . . They make visible and audible the fulfillment of the promises, the coming of the great era of salvation, things that many prophets and many righteous people in vain desired to see and hear. Jesus' miracles reveal the coming of the kingdom of God (65).

More detailed is the discussion in Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, who deals incisively with variant interpretations and comes with a similar view.

10. On the "glory of God" as the chief purpose and end of kingdom-manifestation also in the miracles, cf. John 11:40, "Then Jesus said, 'Did I not tell you that if you believe you would see the glory of God?'"
11. On the relationship of the kingdom to the Lord's Supper cf. H. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 397-443. This is mentioned only in a brief paragraph by Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 325.