

THE KINGDOM OF GOD: A BRIEF EXPOSITION OF ITS MEANING AND IMPLICATIONS¹

by J. Mark Beach

1. What Is the Kingdom of God?

IN THE GOSPEL of Mark, the first words we hear from Jesus are, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Indeed, the kingdom of God (or in Matthew’s Gospel especially, the kingdom of heaven) constitutes the theme of Jesus’ gospel preaching. The people of the Old Testament longed for the coming of the kingdom of God. This was to coincide with the coming of the Messiah. The Gospel writers were very concerned that with the coming of Jesus the Messiah we see the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise, that is, the arrival of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is present in the person of Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 12:28-29; Luke 11:20).

But what is the kingdom of God? The ministry of Jesus gives us a portrait of its scope and reality. He summarized it as follows: “the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me” (Matt. 11:4-6). What is unmistakable about the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, and the coming of the kingdom of God is that it brings forth not only the good message—indeed, the world changing event—of Christ’s work of redemption from sin and reconciliation with God, but it also encompasses the fullness of human existence to bring healing and restoration where there is disorder, disease, brokenness, and despair. As Jesus told the Pharisees, “If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28).

Many New Testament scholars have convincingly demonstrated that the phrases “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” (and other like phrases) refer to the rule or reign of God. I would add the words “redemptive” or “healing” or “restorative” to this definition—the

1. This article brings together, with mild revisions, three articles that were published in *Reformed Pathways*, an insert in *The Messenger*, vol. 29/6 (August 2011); vol. 30 (October 2011); vol. 30 (December 2011), published by Mid-America Reformed Seminary.

healing-restorative-redemptive reign of God. A recent Reformed writer defines it this way: "The kingdom of God ... is to be understood as the reign of God dynamically active in human history through Jesus Christ, the purpose of which is the redemption of his people from sin and from demonic powers, and the final establishment of the new heavens and the new earth." He continues: "It means that the great drama of the history of salvation has been inaugurated, and that the new age has been ushered in." Given the scope and dimensions of Christ's healing work, "The kingdom must not be understood as merely the salvation of certain individuals or even as the reign of God in the hearts of his people; it means nothing less than the reign of God over this entire created universe."² That definition, I think, well captures the center point and the breath of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is his redemptive, restorative, healing, returning-to-fellowship reign—and all this in, through, and because of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

2. What Is the Church?

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

This brings us to inquire about the nature of the church. The Bible, of course, gives us many portraits of the church. It is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27), the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:32), the sheepfold of Christ (John 10), the building, temple, house, and people of God (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet 2:5; 2:9, 10), and those called out of the world (2 Cor. 6:17). That is just a sampling of metaphors and images of the church. Other distinctions apply as well. The word "church" is sometimes used to designate its diversified but collective unity under Christ as its Head (Eph. 1:23; 4:16). Other times the Bible uses the word to refer to local congregations under office-bearers (1 Cor. 3:11, 16; 12:27; Rev. 2 & 3). The church, in obedience to Scripture, has long confessed about itself that it is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. These are its definitive attributes. Meanwhile, we know that hypocrites can be mixed in with God's people undetected; hence the necessity of distinguishing between the church in its visible form (as we know it) and the church in its invisibility (known only

2. Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 45

to God). The church as visible and as invisible means that there does not yet exist an exact numerical unity between the church in its current visible state and the church in its invisible reality. God redemptively communes with its genuine members. Thus, regarding hypocrites in the church who claim in vain to have acted in Christ's name, Christ says that he never knew them (Matt. 7:23).

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

Besides these distinctions, most believers know that the church is called to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. Some Reformed Christians are also familiar with the idea that the church (in its visibility) may be distinguished as an institution on the one hand and as an organism on the other—that is, the church must be conceived in the first instance as a gathered body of believers, under the governing leadership of appointed office-bearers, and called to bring the gospel to the world and nurture its membership with the means of grace; in the second instance these same believers—the church—are viewed as an organism, indicative of a community of faith and life, members of Christ's body. Moreover, as an organism the church constitutes God's people as dispersed into the world (even when they are not gathered in worship or fellowship), where in the pursuit of their vocations and in the exercise of their responsibilities as citizens, as well as their involvement in the day-to-day affairs of public life, they are to bear witness to Christ with their words and their lives (see Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 86); still further, as best they can, they are to exercise a Christ honoring presence (influence) in the wider social fabric of life, which includes the work place, political life, education (in the assorted disciplines of the academy), recreational life, sporting activities, hobbies, and other social and community affairs.

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

This vision of Christ's lordship and the kingdom of God has won the hearts of many Reformed believers, especially with the growing ascendancy of secularism dating back to the Enlightenment (starting about the eighteenth century) and the continuing assault upon biblical principles of morality in public life. Westerners have traveled a road that has taken them very far from the age of a Christian magistrate. Now public life and public institutions are regarded as secular,

and the aim is to keep them free from the corrupting leaven of religion in any form. We recognize this simply as the separation of church and state. But, as we know, that separation means very different things to different people. How does the contest between the kingdom of God (the healing reign of God) and the kingdom of darkness (the deceptive and destructive reign of evil) play out not only in our individual lives as believers but also in public life, in social institutions, with regard to business practices, in the presuppositions and practices of education, environmental issues, and the like? What does the Scripture teach us about this contest?

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

3. The Kingdom of God in the Epochs of Biblical History

3.1. The Kingdom of God and Creation

Creation is God's wondrous and startling act of love and freedom. According to his own wisdom and goodness, and given the intratrinitarian fellowship of his perfect happiness and eternal counsel, and out of his almightiness, strength, and freedom, God, in the beginning, creates the heavens and the earth. Creation is God's act to share his love and fellowship with beings other than himself; it is an act grounded in his goodness and his liberty. Nothing compels him to create except his own glorious love. In fact, God, in his kindness, creates human beings, fashioned in his image, to act as stewards of his creation and to walk in his blessed fellowship (Gen. 1:22, 26-28).

Here we see that from the beginning God purposed a kingdom of God, which means that Adam and Eve were first created to live in fellowship with God, under his blessed rule and direction for their lives—and this was for God's glory and their happiness. Moreover, from the creation account in Scripture we learn that man's service to God encompassed the length and breath of life, symbolized in the naming the animals, along with the specific mandate and call to *rule over* the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the cattle and every creeping thing, indeed, over all the earth and every living thing in it (Gen. 1:26, 28). We see that man's fellowship with God at the creation, before the fall, was not merely a ramble in the woods and a stroll on the lawn, praying and singing hymns all day long. Man's fellowship with God, living under God's favor and truth, and trusting his Lord and Creator enfolded life in its broad horizon and vast, varied diversity. The world, rich and variegated, was the arena of God's

kingdom of communion with man, his image-bearer. Again, this was for God's glory and human happiness.

At creation, the kingdom of God is centered upon God's relationship with man, but includes man's calling in service to God, and so includes the whole environment of the created order—that is, man's capacity to know, develop, and enjoy the creation, with its divinely built-in potentialities, to be used for the glory of God, and the obedient exercise of dominion over all the earth and all living things.

The first epoch of human history, the creation before the fall, was a period of blessedness and innocence. To be sure, at this stage that blessedness was still in an embryonic state. Man's obedience was to be tested inasmuch as obedience to God—in the way of faith and full trusting devotion to him—was yet unproved; and so the blessed destiny awaiting Adam and his race had not yet reached its full potential. We may liken it to a bud waiting to come to full flower, a city of God that yet needed to be filled out, formed, and populated, a human pair that already enjoyed God's dominion and care over them, but did not yet know the full development and abundance of life under his reign.

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

3.2. The Kingdom of God and the Fall

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

Moreover, we must note that, with the fall, Satan becomes a prince—the ruler of this world (Eph. 2:2; John 12:31). God’s reign of fellowship with his unfallen creation has come to an end. Now the cosmos is filled with alien forces, enemies to his cause; now God’s beautiful purpose for the world is horribly imperiled and astray. Note: “imperiled” and “astray” but not forfeited and abandoned, for the Lord immediately promises the reestablishment of his kingship of fellowship through the Seed of the woman, whom Scripture subsequently unveils as Christ the Lord. The Seed of the woman must contend against the seed of the serpent—a combat waged through the ages but culminating in Satan being crushed under Christ’s heel (see Gen. 3:15; Rev. 12; Gal. 3:16, 19). Consequently, in some sense, after the fall, it is proper to speak of two kingdoms—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. The kingdom of God after the fall must now take on important redemptive dimensions, and so it exhibits its most conspicuous traits from the contest that rages in the world between God and the devil for the hearts of God’s scarred and depraved image-bearers. Men and women, once free and innocent, are now enslaved and impure; and God comes to rescue them. God comes to reestablish his rule of blessing and fellowship over their lives. This is the reign of fellowship (the kingdom) God lost with the fall when he lost the allegiance of his human creatures and therefore lost his rule over their hearts and lives—hearts and lives he created for fellowship with him to his glory and their happiness.

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

Before we go further, however, it is necessary that we recognize an important distinction in speaking about the kingdom of God, namely, the distinction between God’s kingship of sovereignty from his kingship of redemption and communion. The first we may call God’s kingship of power, the second his kingdom of redemption. Given the biblical portrayal of Satan as the prince and ruler of this world, we must observe the difference between God’s sovereignty and God’s kingdom. Sovereignty is that attribute of God whereby, according to his power and wisdom, he rules over all things outside himself,

all creatures, indeed, everything! God is sovereign; therefore he rules over all things. No matter what happens or doesn't happen, his right and might are never thwarted, compromised, or held in check. Nothing can stand in the way of his invincible power and authority.

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

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

3.3. The Kingdom of God and Redemption

We now arrive at the epoch of divine redemption, for the Lord embarks upon his gracious work to reestablish the kingdom of God. This is nothing less than his project to regain his reign of fellowship over the estranged and broken creation through his redemptive and healing rule. This finds its focus in God's fallen image-bearers, but, as we shall see, finally embraces the entire scope of God's creation. Moreover, the kingdom reaches fulfillment in the epoch of redemption, especially with the coming of Jesus Christ. Since Christ's coming, but prior to the great consummation, the kingdom of God is now arrived in principle but is, in all its fullness and healing power, still to come.

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.

3.3.1. *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.

3.3.2. *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 indeed his works 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 prefiguration, 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).

3.3.3. *The Keys of the Kingdom and 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, 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 conceived as believers dispersed into the world—while pursuing their vocations and interacting with those who are citizens of the kingdom of the devil—likewise lives under the

kingship of Christ (the 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 is lived beyond the community of the faithful gathered for worship on Sundays; it is lived in the broader public arena. In that context, too, the Christian life 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. (We will look further at the relationship between church and kingdom under section 4 below.)

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 through 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 humanity, 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 their 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 they seek 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 the wider domain of life and seeking to bring the various vocations and cultural activities of life into obedience to their king, 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, remind us not only 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, it is not strange that Jesus Christ—the One who has all authority in heaven and on earth—looks to manifest his lordship in the whole of our lives, for the Ten Commandments infiltrate every area of life. Nothing may be a god to us, or have our heart’s allegiance as god, except God alone.

3.3.4. *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 “al-

ready” of the kingdom of God is reflected wherever the healing and redemptive reign of God is gaining ascendancy—the church being the exhibit front and center of this. 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 New Testament 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.

4. Are Church and Kingdom the Same Entity?

Having traced out how the coming of Jesus Christ brings the definitive reestablishment of the kingdom of God, ushering forth his reign of fellowship and healing, so that Christ’s redemptive and restorative rule over the estranged and broken creation now comes to manifestation, we now return to a topic we only briefly addressed earlier, namely, the question surrounding the relationship between “the church” and “the kingdom of God.” From here, we want to further explore how Christians should live in the world as citizens of God’s kingdom. That is, what are the implications of this vision of the kingdom of God for the Christian in the world?

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 entirely 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."³

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 dominion of Satan—which, let it be noted, is a demonic dominion not limited to an ecclesiastical sphere of life. Moreover, the Larger Catechism, in

3. Louis Berkhof, *The Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951), 24.

expositing 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.

Even before the exposition of the Westminster Assembly on these petitions, the Heidelberg Catechism had addressed these same phrases from the Lord's Prayer. It offers this exposition of the words "Thy kingdom come": "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."

Let it be observed that 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. The coming of God's kingdom involves his healing, redemptive, restorative reign, which is cosmic in scope.

The catechism gives a further explication of what this reign of God means in its exposition of the next petition, "Thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven." According to the Heidelberg Catechism, this prayer is asking God for divine assistance: "Help us and all people to reject our own wills and to obey your will without any back talk. Your will alone is good. Help us, one and all, to carry out the work we are called to, as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven." Here we see that the petition involves "all people," not just the church. It involves "one and all" doing the work to which each is called in their respective tasks and responsibilities in life, not just our duties on Sunday or at corporate worship. This petition asks that peace and fellowship with God be restored and that his righteous will be lived out by believers and all people, so that the communion God has with the angels and their obedience to him might be manifest in and characterize his people. Moreover, God's will *alone* is good. Against all rival wills in the world; against all rival kingdoms and causes standing opposed to God's kingdom and Christ's cause, there is *one*

will alone that must be done everywhere and by everyone. His will alone is good. Accordingly, 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.

Having explicated "Thy kingdom come" and "Thy will be done" (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2) from some key Reformed documents, it is readily apparent that *kingdom* and *church* are not equivalent terms. Thus, to pray "Thy kingdom come" is not equivalent to praying for the church to come. Yes, in praying for the coming of God's kingdom we are also praying for the establishment and the blessing of the church. But prayer for the coming of the kingdom of God is more comprehensive in scope than the work of the institutional church. In praying "Thy kingdom come" we are praying for the redemptive supremacy and rule of God to come forth and show itself in this world. In other words, and 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; 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).

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.*"⁴

5. Implications: the Present Shape and Scope of God's 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.

5.1. The Reign of Christ Is Not Limited to the Institutional Church

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

4. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th revised edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939, 1941), 409.

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*.

5.2. Anointed with Christ as Prophets, Priests, and Kings

Indeed, Berkhof reminds us of that very thing. We must not forget 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*, Christ 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 earlier, see 3.2.) This kingship of Christ’s power, however, serves his kingship of 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, as we saw earlier, 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 unanoint 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!*" There are not sectors of life outside his jurisdiction!

5.3. Christ Claims Our Hearts and Our Whole Lives

The Heidelberg Catechism rightly reminds us that we are not our own, but belong to 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 us, for Satan would master us and claim us in every dimension of our lives. Christ's redemptive work reaches as far as the curse is found.

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; therefore, 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. As believers in Christ, we 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, for it 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 the 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!

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.

6. Conclusion

As it was noted at the outset of this essay, 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 (according to the devil's schemes). 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.

Colossians 1:13 however 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 the devil's 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 throat. 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.