



THE
Kingdom
OF
God

David J. Engelsma



The Kingdom of God

David J. Engelsma

David J. Engelsma is professor-emeritus of Dogmatics and Old Testament at the Protestant Reformed Seminary in Grandville, Michigan, and former editor of the *Standard Bearer*, a Reformed semi-monthly periodical published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association. The chapters in this pamphlet appeared first as editorials in the *Standard Bearer*, volume 77: November 15, 2000 - September 15, 2001.

Pamphlet published by
the Evangelism Committee of
Southwest Protestant Reformed Church
4875 Ivanrest Ave. SW
Grandville, Michigan 49418

2002
Reprint 2012

*“Who ... hath translated us into the kingdom
of his dear Son.”*

Colossians 1:13

The Kingdom of God

1	<i>The Kingdom of God's Dear Son</i>	1
2	<i>The Kingdom of the Rule of God</i>	7
3	<i>The Kingdom Is Not Carnal</i>	13
4	<i>The Kingdom Is Spiritual</i>	17
5	<i>The Kingdom Is the Church</i>	23
6	<i>The Church As Kingdom</i>	29
7	<i>The Kingdom in the Lives of the Citizens</i>	36



1

The Kingdom of God's Dear Son

The kingdom of God is not as well known among us as are the covenant of God and the church of God. It does not receive as much attention in the teaching as do the covenant and the church. This is a weakness, for the kingdom is of central importance in the revelation of Holy Scripture.

If the kingdom of God is seen, not as something different from the covenant but as the distinct form of the covenant, the Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Ridderbos was right when he said that the kingdom of God is “the central theme of the whole New Testament revelation of God” (*The Coming of the Kingdom*, Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962). Mark tells us that Jesus began His ministry “preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:14b, 15). Everyone knows that Jesus’ favorite form of preaching was the parable, and the parables set forth the kingdom of God. In explanation of this form of teaching, Jesus Himself described the content of the parables as “the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 13:11). Usually, the parable is introduced by the words, “The kingdom is like unto....” In Luke 4:43, Jesus said that preaching “the kingdom of God” was the very purpose of His ministry. This was His mission: “Therefore am I sent.”

The importance of the kingdom of God, especially in these last days, is plain from the book of Revelation. The theme of the book is the victory of the kingdom of God and its king in the great war between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the dragon.

Kingdom of God

As Jesus indicated in Mark 1 when He said that the coming of the kingdom fulfilled the time, the kingdom of God was also central in the Old Testament. At the heart of the Old Testament was the history of Israel, which was the kingdom of God. At the very center of that heart was the coming of Messiah the king.

The biblical truth of the kingdom of God is also of great interest to us because of the controversies that swirl about it. The Roman Catholic Church identifies the kingdom of God with its own papal organization. Liberal Protestantism makes the kingdom of God the peaceful, prosperous condition of society that results from carrying out Jesus' teaching on love and brotherhood. The World Council of Churches and similar agencies are striving for the kingdom of God, which for them is a world of united nations; the absence of war, poverty, disease, and discrimination; and the enjoyment of earthly well-being.

For many fundamentalists and evangelicals all over the world, the kingdom of God is a future Jewish nation in Palestine that will be ruled by Jesus and that will continue for 1000 years. These are the premillennial dispensationalists. This view of the kingdom is very influential among religious people. Today it makes inroads into the secular world, at least in the United States. In recent years, books in a series called "Left Behind" are high on the New York *Times* best-seller list. These books are the fictionalized and popularized presentation of the doctrinal notion that the kingdom of God is to be a restored nation of Israel.

Closer to home, certain Reformed and Presbyterian theologians teach the kingdom of God as mainly a worldwide earthly rule of all nations by the church in the future before the second coming of Christ.

We may not overlook that the kingdom of God has practical significance for us. We are citizens of the kingdom of God according to the apostle in Colossians 1:13. Implied are our blessedness and our calling.

By the kingdom of God in this booklet we have in mind God's reign by Jesus Christ in distinction from God's rule

over all things by His almighty power. The kingdom of God that is central in the gospel of the Scriptures is God's reign of grace by the Spirit and Word of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Son of God. This is proved from Jesus' announcement at the beginning of His ministry, "The kingdom of God is *at hand*" (Mark 1:15). The kingdom was then near to be established. God's sovereign rule of all as Creator, of course, was always a reality.

That the kingdom of God is God's reign of grace in Christ is also proved by the second petition of the model prayer: "Thy kingdom come." The coming of the kingdom implies a progressive realization of the kingdom of God. One day in the future, as the Heidelberg Catechism explains in Lord's Day 48, "the full perfection of [God's] kingdom [will] take place." This cannot be said of God's almighty rule over all by His power. God's rule of power does not *come*, but *is*. But it is true of God's gracious reign in Jesus Christ that it comes.

The kingdom *of God* is the same as the kingdom *of Christ*. Sometimes the New Testament speaks of the kingdom of God; at other times it speaks of the kingdom of Christ. One and the same kingdom is in view. Kingdom *of God* emphasizes that the triune God conceived and established this kingdom and that the kingdom exists for His sake. Kingdom of Christ brings out that God conceived and established this kingdom in Jesus Christ and that Christ governs this kingdom on God's behalf, as the servant of God.

Since some deny that the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Christ are identical, explaining them as two different kingdoms, and since this results in serious error about the kingdom of God, the identity should be demonstrated. In Colossians 1:13 the apostle tells us that we have been translated into "the kingdom *of God's dear Son*," that is, the kingdom of Christ. In I Thessalonians 2:12 the same apostle tells us that God has called us unto "*his kingdom*," that is, the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God's dear Son and the kingdom of God are one and the same. Ephesians 5:5 calls the kingdom by both names: "the kingdom of Christ and of God."

Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God, therefore, is the Messianic kingdom of salvation and glory. In his commentary on the second petition of the model prayer, Herman Hoeksema describes it as “the commonwealth in which God is King, in which He is known and acknowledged, loved and freely obeyed, by willing subjects as the only Sovereign of all, whose Word is law, written in the hearts of all the citizens of the kingdom” (*The Triple Knowledge*, vol. 3, Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1972, p. 518). It is the kingdom typified and prophesied in the Old Testament by the nation of Israel, especially in connection with the kingships of David and Solomon. It is the kingdom established as a reality in the world by the incarnation and ministry of Jesus Christ and extended throughout the world by the preaching of the gospel, first by the apostles and then by a church faithful to the great commission.

***The kingdom of God that is central in the gospel
of the Scriptures is God’s reign of grace by the Spirit
and Word of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Son of God.
This is proved from Jesus’ announcement
at the beginning of His ministry,
“The kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15).
The kingdom was then near to be established.
God’s sovereign rule of all as Creator, of course,
was always a reality.***

The kingdom of God brings deliverance from the tyranny and death of sin and bestows righteousness and eternal life. To be in the kingdom is to enjoy God, whereas to be outside the kingdom is to perish under His wrath. According to Colossians 1:12, 13, when God translated, or transferred, us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, He blessed us in two wonderful ways. He rescued us from the power of darkness, and He made us partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light.

Revelation 22:15 represents the final state of the damned as exclusion from the city, which is the “full perfection of the kingdom of God” spoken of by the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord’s Day 48. Outside the kingdom will be dogs, sorcerers, whoremongers, murderers, idolaters, and whosoever loves and makes a lie.

The kingdom of God will be the kingdom of Jesus Christ forever. It is a mistake to suppose that the kingdom of Christ will end with the second coming of the Lord Jesus, when He has perfected the kingdom of God His Father. Some make this mistake on the basis of a faulty understanding of I Corinthians 15:24-28. Verse 25 teaches that Christ must reign “till he hath put all enemies under his feet.” Verse 24 teaches that when Christ has finally put all enemies under His feet, He will deliver up the kingdom to God the Father. Some explain the passage as teaching that this will be the end of the Messianic kingdom. Christ will no longer be king. Kingship over the perfected kingdom of God in the entire renewed creation will be exercised directly by the triune God.

But the Bible elsewhere clearly teaches that Jesus Christ is an everlasting king and that the kingdom of Christ—the Messianic kingdom—is everlasting. According to Daniel 7:14, the kingdom that is given to the Son of Man by the Ancient of Days is “an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.” Revelation 22:1, 3, which pictures the kingdom of God which Jesus Christ has established, defended, and perfected, unmistakably speaks of the “throne of God and of the Lamb.” Correctly, Lord’s Day 12 of the Heidelberg Catechism calls Jesus “our eternal king.”

In I Corinthians 15, the apostle does not teach that Christ will one day cease being the king of the kingdom of God under God His Father. But he teaches that the goal of Christ’s reign is the subduing of all His enemies. When He accomplishes this at His second coming and when at the same time He perfects the kingdom in all the new world, He will, in a solemn ceremony, present the kingdom to God as the accomplishment of the work that God gave Him to do. Under God and on behalf of God, Christ will continue to reign over the kingdom forever.

Kingdom of God

This honors Christ and delights us, as William Symington states at the end of his fine defense of the everlasting kingship of Christ against the mistaken interpretation of I Corinthians 15:24-28:

It cannot but be honouring to Christ to regard him as reigning for ever and ever; and it cannot but be pleasing, beyond all description, to his saints to think that they are never to lose sight of him as their King, never to cease to be his subjects, never but to yield him their grateful heartfelt homage. It cannot but rejoice them to know that they are to be ever under his rule, and that, even after they are taken to glory, they shall continue to behold him as the Lamb in the midst of the throne for ever and ever. What a prospect! How should it excite us to prepare for its being realized! Happy they who, having submitted themselves to him in time as King of saints, shall be eternally under his sway as King of glory! (*Messiah the Prince*, Edmonton, AB, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, repr. 1990, p. 348.) ◻

2

The Kingdom of the Rule of God

The basic idea of the kingdom is the rule of God—the living, actual, liberating, saving, blessed rule of God in Jesus Christ. We may think of it this way. The whole world lies enslaved to the reign of Satan. Into this world breaks the reign of God, freeing many from the misery, terror, sin, death, and hell of the dark lord, translating them into the knowledge, righteousness, peace, and life of His reign. This is what Jesus proclaimed at the beginning of His ministry: The rule of God is at hand! This is the explanation, why the gospel is called the gospel of the kingdom: the content is the rule of God in Christ.

It is a mistake to understand the kingdom exclusively, or even mainly, in terms of a realm, or in terms of citizens. The kingdom of God is certainly a realm, a territory, just as the United States is a certain land-mass with clearly defined boundaries. Jesus spoke in John 3:5 of *entering* the kingdom. The church has the *keys* of the kingdom, giving entrance into the realm to some and barring others from it. This realm is the church, including the godly lives of her members in every sphere of earthly life.

The kingdom of God has citizens, just as every earthly nation has citizens. These are the elect out of all earthly nations and races. In the day of the final judgment, the Son of Man on His throne will say to the sheep on His right hand, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25:34). These persons show themselves citizens by obeying God the king: They believe the gospel, and submit to the laws of the kingdom.

The citizens of the kingdom include the children—the *in-*

Kingdom of God

fant children—of elect believers. It is a grievous error on the part of Reformed ministers and churches to minimize the seriousness of the Baptist heresy. Indeed, this error will prove fatal to the Reformed faith in these churches. Reformed ministers are guilty of this error. They cooperate freely with Baptists in public religious activities. They refuse sharply to condemn the Baptist exclusion from the covenant and church of God of many for whom Christ died and to whom the Spirit of Christ is promised (see Heid. Cat., Q. 74). In flat contradiction of their own creed, which declares that the Reformed faith detests the error of the Baptists, they write openly that the issue of infant baptism is not of fundamental importance (see Bel. Conf., Art. 34).

The inclusion of the children of believers in the kingdom of God, by infant baptism, is an essential truth of the kingdom. It is a truth that must be vigorously defended and promoted wherever the Reformed faith makes its distinctive witness. It is a truth that is fundamental to the oneness of the kingdom of God in the Old and New Testaments. It is a truth that is fundamental to the rejection of the miserable corruption of the kingdom by dispensationalism.

Concerning infant children (and this is what they were according to the Greek word that is used in the passage), Jesus said, “*of such* is the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:17). As regards its citizens, the kingdom of God is made up of such infant children. Mark 10:14 tells us that Jesus was indignant with His disciples for attempting to exclude the infant children from Jesus’ kingdom. What earthly king would not be irate at the attempt by some underling to strip a substantial number of his people of their citizenship and banish them from his realm?

In addition to being a realm and having citizens, the kingdom of God provides benefits. The kingdom can be identified with these benefits, just as one might have said in the early days of World War II, that England was liberty in the midst of the tyranny of a Europe overrun by Nazi Germany. Paul identifies the kingdom of God with its wonderful blessings in Romans 14:17: “For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.”

Important as realm, citizens, and benefits are as aspects of the kingdom, they are not the main thing. The main thing is the rule of God. First and central in the kingdom of God is the *king*. The kingdom of God is simply God the king and His kingship.

We modern Westerners have a hard time grasping this, familiar as we are with democracy and unfamiliar as we are with real monarchs. An Englishman during the reign of King Henry VIII would have had no problem understanding. Recent history, however, has shown us something of the primacy and centrality of the “leader” in his kingdom. The mighty kingdom of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s was the creation of Adolf Hitler—the extension of his powerful will. Hitler dominated that kingdom. It existed for him. That was certainly true of the great empires of Old Testament times. Babylon was simply Nebuchadnezzar enlarged. This will be the case also with the coming kingdom of Antichrist.

What is true of earthly kingdoms—the centrality of the ruler—is originally and supremely true of the kingdom of God in Christ. It is the kingdom *of God* because God establishes, maintains, and perfects the kingdom. *He* conceived and planned it in His decree. *He* founded it in the cross of the incarnate Son. *He* builds it by the preaching of the gospel in all the world in the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. *He* brings every one who is a citizen according to eternal election into the kingdom by the sovereign wonder of regeneration: “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Having regenerated, He sanctifies every citizen to live the life of the kingdom and preserves him to the glory of the perfection of the kingdom. *He* will perfect the kingdom in the Day of Christ, raising the dead and renewing the entire creation of heaven and earth.

God, God *only*, is the creator, the origin, of the kingdom. The kingdom comes from Him, not from man. The kingdom, therefore, depends upon God—upon God *only*.

In part, this is the meaning of the description of the kingdom as the “kingdom *of heaven*.” When Jesus said to Pilate

Kingdom of God

in John 18:36, “My kingdom is not *of* this world ... my kingdom [is] not *from hence*,” He was saying something about the origin of His kingdom. His kingdom—the kingdom of God—is not from this world; it does not have its origin in this world. Implied, positively, is that Jesus’ kingdom originates in heaven; it comes from God.

The kingdom is the kingdom *of God* also because it is for God, has its ultimate goal in His glory, and is about Him. The kingdom of God is God-centered. How Christ and the apostles proclaim this! We think at once of the conclusion of the model prayer in Matthew 6: “For thine is the kingdom.” The Heidelberg Catechism explains: “... and all this we pray for, that thereby not we, but Thy holy name may be glorified forever” (Q. 128). Describing the perfection of the kingdom, when Christ shall have put all enemies under His feet, the apostle declares that then God will be all in all (I Cor. 15:28).

The kingdom is for the sake of God in these respects. First, the message, or gospel, of the kingdom is all about God, is a God-centered message. This is the content of the gospel in Scripture. This was the content of the gospel preached by the Reformation. This is still the content of the gospel proclaimed by the true church. How much is this true in the preaching and teaching of evangelical and even Reformed churches today?

Second, in the kingdom God’s will governs the life and behavior of the citizens. God’s law governs our personal lives: regarding church membership; regarding dating and marriage; regarding life in the family; regarding business and labor; regarding civil government; regarding eating and drinking.

God’s law also governs the life of the instituted church: regarding worship; regarding doctrine; regarding discipline; regarding offices; regarding denominational connections.

Third, in the kingdom our will, pleasures, friendships, families, and very lives are so subject to the king, that we are called to sacrifice them to God’s glory when this may be necessary. The kingdom is the kingdom *of God*. The king does not exist for the citizens, but we

citizens exist for the king. When professing Christians, facing some personal suffering or loss, whine, “Christ would never require such hardship and pain of me,” they show that they do not know the kingdom as the kingdom of God.

What all this truth about the kingdom of God comes down to is the grand testimony of the Reformed faith, that salvation is by sovereign grace alone to the glory of God only. The message of the kingdom of God is nothing other than the gospel of sovereign grace. God saves His elect by regenerating grace, apart from any worth of theirs, any faith or decision of theirs, any acceptance of an offer that distinguishes them from others whom He is supposed to love also. God preserves His elect, regenerated people. God so rules His own by the sanctifying Spirit that they yield to His lordship, obeying His law in every sphere of life and gladly suffering the loss of all for His sake. God builds His church.

***God, God only, is the creator, the origin, of the kingdom.
The kingdom comes from Him, not from man.
The kingdom, therefore, depends upon God
— upon God only.***

That God is God in Jesus Christ is not some queer, parochial, and even sectarian message of a small Reformed denomination in North America, but the very gospel that Jesus came preaching and that He Himself still preaches by a faithful church and her ministry.

By this criterion must every proposed “kingdom of God” be tested. Is God central in the kingdom? Is He all in all?

Where now *is* this kingdom of God, this rule of God in Jesus Christ?

It is in heaven, according to Philippians 3:20, where Christ the king is, at God’s right hand.

Kingdom of God

It is also in the world. It is wherever Christ the king is. Since Christ Jesus is present in the preaching of the gospel and in the administration of the sacraments, wherever the gospel is preached and the sacraments administered, there is the kingdom of God—the blessed, saving, God-glorifying rule of God. We ought to press into it, as Jesus taught in Luke 16:16. We do this by believing in Him, the king.

By the gospel and the sacraments the rule of God, which liberates sinners, is established in the heart and life of every one who has been born again by the Spirit.

The institutional form of the kingdom is the church. The relation of the kingdom and the church will be the subject of following chapters.

Are we in the kingdom? Has God translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son?

He has, if we see it, if we live its life, if we find in ourselves some zeal for glorifying God the king.

What a privilege! Let us be thankful.

What a blessing! It is salvation.

What a calling! Our life must be our seeking the kingdom first.

What a hope! We will reign with Christ forever in the new world. □

3

The Kingdom Is Not Carnal

In the two previous chapters, I introduced the great subject of the kingdom of God. The first chapter established that “the kingdom of God that is central in the gospel of the Scriptures is God’s reign of grace by the Spirit and Word of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Son of God.” It is “God’s reign of grace in Christ,” in distinction from God’s rule over all things by His almighty power.

The second chapter contended that “the basic idea of the kingdom is the rule of God—the living, actual, liberating, saving, blessed rule of God in Jesus Christ.” Although the kingdom includes a realm, has citizens (including the children of believers), and provides benefits, it *is* the rule of God in Christ. The kingdom of God is simply God the king and His kingship. This chapter concluded by promising a study of the relation of the kingdom of God and the church. The present chapter begins to fulfill this promise.

I state the fundamental truth concerning the relation of the kingdom and the church as clearly, sharply, and succinctly as possible: The kingdom of God in our present, New Testament age is the church.

Some may disagree, but no one can fail to understand.

This simple, basic truth about the kingdom is, first, the teaching of the Bible. Second, it is the historical and confessional position of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, indeed, of the Reformation churches generally.

It is also a truth that needs to be taught and defended everywhere in the world. The reason is that this truth is widely

Kingdom of God

challenged. Under the pressure of teachings that make the kingdom of God something different from the church, professing Christians are doubtful about the identification of the kingdom and the church. One practical (and fatal) result is disparagement, if not contempt, for the church, including lively membership in the true church.

We must be clear as to our terms. By “kingdom of God,” we mean the rule of God in Christ. This rule forms a realm within which Christ’s reign on God’s behalf holds sway. In closest connection with this realm is the populace, the citizenry, and then not as so many regenerated individuals but as a united, well-ordered “commonwealth,” or nation. Within the realm, the citizens enjoy the blessings of the kingdom of God.

By the church, every Reformed Christian will understand the universal body of Jesus Christ made up of all the elect out of all nations and manifesting itself in the true, local, instituted congregation. Recalling Jesus’ teaching that at His first coming the kingdom was “nigh,” we shall have in mind the New Testament, fulfilled, mature form of the church. Old Testament Israel was the church all right, but as Paul teaches in Galatians 4:1ff. only in an immature, undeveloped form.

The kingdom of God is the church. The living reign of God in Christ by the Word and Spirit is the church. The realm is the sphere of the church. The citizens are the members of the church. The blessings of the kingdom are poured out on and enjoyed in the church.

I state the fundamental truth concerning the relation of the kingdom and the church as clearly, sharply, and succinctly as possible:

The kingdom of God in our present, New Testament age is the church.

There is a truth about the kingdom of God that is basic to the confession that the kingdom of God is the church. This is the truth that the kingdom of God is *spiritual*. Spiritual-

ity is an essential quality of the kingdom of God. Knowledge of the spiritual nature of the kingdom is essential to the right belief about the kingdom. The great errors about the kingdom that are afoot today have this in common, that they view the kingdom as earthly, as political, as carnal. This is the gross, wicked error of dispensationalism, that makes the kingdom of God an earthly Jewish world-power. This is the gross, wicked error of the liberals, that makes the kingdom an earthly, one-world government, which will satisfy all the fleshly desires of godless mankind: plenty to eat and drink; the gratification of every perverse sexual lust; the elimination of all inconvenient persons—unborn babies, old people, sick people, and, eventually, orthodox Christians; and the eradication of war and social strife.

Viewing the kingdom as carnal is also the error of those who suppose that the most important realization of the kingdom of God will be an earthly, political, visibly glorious Christian empire that Christ will rear up in the world before His second coming. Yes, they will agree, somewhat impatiently, the church is *a* manifestation of the kingdom at present. But the superior manifestation of the kingdom of God, the Messianic kingdom in its best and fullest form, the kingdom that finally fulfills the prophecy of the Old Testament in Psalm 72 and similar passages will be that future, earthly world-power that will have Christianized all nations.

Against these errors and on behalf of the right understanding of the kingdom of God, we must believe and confess that the kingdom of God is spiritual.

In his book, *Thy Kingdom Come* (n.p.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), Rousas J. Rushdoony, father of the Christian Reconstruction movement, says this: “The reduction of the kingdom of God to a spiritual realm is in effect a denial of the kingdom” (p. 177). I appreciate that Rushdoony sees the fundamental issue concerning the kingdom and states this issue bluntly. But in flat contradiction to this statement, I maintain that Scripture teaches that the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ is essentially and entirely a spiritual realm. I maintain further that every denial of the spirituality of the kingdom is a denial of the kingdom of God.

Kingdom of God

It is significant that Rushdoony utters this denial, that the kingdom is spiritual, in the context of his denial that the church is to be identified with the kingdom: “The church ... is not to be identified as the kingdom of God, but simply as a part of the kingdom” (p. 178). Mr. Rushdoony practiced what he preached. Writing in 1991, fellow Christian Reconstructionist Gary North informed the world that “Rushdoony does not belong to a local church, nor has he taken communion in two decades, except when he is on the road, speaking at a church that has a policy of open communion or is unaware of his non-member status” (*Westminster’s Confession*, Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991, p. 80).

In explanation of the spirituality of the kingdom of God, negatively, the kingdom is not earthly in nature. It does not consist of dominion by physical force — the sword and its terror. It does not promise or provide earthly blessings and goods — earthly peace and material prosperity. It does not claim any earthly country for its territory — Palestine, North America, Scotland, or the Netherlands. It does not possess or display any earthly glory — power, weapons, numbers, size, or impressive leader (the Christ of the biblical gospel of the cross is not impressive to the natural man). Indeed, its citizens are not citizens by virtue of any earthly characteristic, whether race, sex, nationality, status, or achievement.

In keeping with its unearthly nature, the kingdom of God cannot be known by man’s physical senses. This is literally what Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:3: “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Christ taught the same thing in Luke 17:20 when, in response to the Pharisees’ question, when the kingdom of God should come, He said, “The kingdom of God cometh not with observation.” The kingdom comes without “observation” in that the manner of its coming is invisible.

The kingdom of God, therefore, is unlike every other (human) kingdom. It is radically unlike all other kingdoms. It is unlike all other kingdoms in quality, in its essential nature. It is another kind of kingdom from that of Babylon, Rome, the British Empire, Germany, modern Israel, or the United States. □

4

The Kingdom Is Spiritual

The kingdom of God is spiritual. It is spiritual rule, or government. It affords spiritual benefits. It creates and occupies a spiritual territory. It reflects a spiritual glory. It creates a spiritual citizenry.

It is not fantastic, imaginary, and ghostly, like C. S. Lewis' Narnia, or J. R. R. Tolkien's middle earth, or J. K. Rowling's Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. It is a real kingdom. It is present in the world, exercising its tremendous power, creating and empowering its citizens, advancing and enlarging with invincible force, destroying the weapons and defenses of its enemies. So real is the kingdom of God to us who have been translated into it by being begotten from above, so that we now have the spiritual sight of faith to see it, that the kingdom of God is the solid, substantial reality, whereas all earthly kingdoms are frail, fleeting shadows.

Oh yes, the kingdom of God is reality, but it is spiritual reality. Spiritual does not mean unreal. Spiritual means unreal only to the unspiritual—the materialist, the natural man (I Cor. 2:9-16). Spiritual describes the kind of reality. There is a physical reality, for example, the United States of America. There is a spiritual reality, namely, the kingdom of God.

We do not doubt spiritual reality, do we? We do not esteem spiritual reality less than the physical and earthly, do we? We have not become crass Darwinian materialists, have we? Why, as Christians, our ultimate hope is a spiritual body in a perfectly, exclusively spiritual world, according to I Corinthians 15:44-49:

Kingdom of God

It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly.

The Spirituality of the Kingdom

As spiritual, the kingdom of God is the creation of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Nebuchadnezzar created Babylon; Franklin, Jefferson, Washington, and others created the United States; Hitler created Nazi Germany. The Spirit of Christ created the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is spiritual, in the second place, in that its life and power are the life and power of the risen, exalted Jesus Christ. In His resurrection, Jesus has passed into a new life and has received hitherto unknown power, the highest life and greatest power that man can possess and wield: immortal, eternal life! life-giving, death-overcoming, irresistible power!

This is the teaching of the apostle in I Corinthians 15:42ff. There is a spiritual body: the body of the risen Jesus Christ. The last Adam—Jesus Christ—was made a “quickenning spirit.” Jesus Christ and everything about Him is spiritual. Now the kingdom of God in the world is simply the life and power of the risen Jesus Christ in history. Since Jesus is spiritual, so is, and must be (and cannot but be), His kingdom. In the language of I Corinthians 15, the kingdom is not “natural,” is not “earthy.”

So much is it true that the kingdom of God is not earthy, that the Bible describes it as heavenly. This is its

nature, its quality. This is the kind of kingdom it is. The kingdom of God is the heavenly life and power of Jesus Christ breaking into our world. There is first a beachhead in Palestine. Then, over the years the kingdom expands throughout the whole world, until finally in the Day of Christ, by the wonder of the second coming, the life and power of Christ renew the entire creation as the kingdom of God.

There is something mysterious about the kingdom of God, therefore. Of course, there is. We are familiar with earthly kingdoms: the will to earthly, political power; the lust for earthly glory; earthly force terrifying or enthralling the citizens; the enjoyment of earthly peace and prosperity. But this spiritual kingdom is new and different.

... the kingdom of God is reality, but it is spiritual reality.

Spiritual does not mean unreal.

Spiritual means unreal only to the unspiritual

— the materialist, the natural man (I Cor. 2:9-16).

Spiritual describes the kind of reality.

There is a physical reality, for example,

the United States of America.

There is a spiritual reality, namely, the kingdom of God.

Nevertheless, Scripture reveals something of the spiritual kingdom, and we who have been translated into it experience the beginnings of its life and power. The kingdom is characterized by truth, and the truth is the Word of God—the gospel of inspired Scripture, including the law. The kingdom is characterized by righteousness, and righteousness is the justification of the sinner by faith alone, followed by a life of obedience to the law of God. The kingdom is characterized by peace, and peace is a tranquil, harmonious relation with God by the pardon of sins and in the way of walking with Him in holiness. The kingdom is

Kingdom of God

characterized by service, and the service is confessing the Lordship of Jesus Christ and doing His will. The kingdom is characterized by prosperity, and the prosperity is the riches of salvation.

Scripture on the Spirituality of the Kingdom

Scripture teaches that the kingdom is spiritual. Writing to the saints at Colosse in the middle of the first century A.D., when there certainly was no earthly, visible, political Christian kingdom, the apostle declared that every one who is born again and believes the gospel has thereby been transferred into the kingdom of the Son of God's love, that is, into the Messianic kingdom of God (Col. 1:13). On the one hand, this demolishes the notion that the kingdom of Christ is a future, millennial, Jewish state and world-power. On the other hand, it likewise demolishes all earthly conceptions of the kingdom. If we who believe the gospel are now in the kingdom (and Colossians 1:13 assures us that we are), the kingdom is present and spiritual. If Paul and the Colossian Christians were already in the kingdom of Christ (and Colossians 1:13 says that they were), the kingdom of Christ broke into the world on the day of Pentecost as a spiritual kingdom.

Then, there is Jesus' word to Pilate in John 18:36, a word that is absolutely crucial to the right understanding of the kingdom: "My kingdom is not of this world." To be sure, Jesus described the *origin* of His kingdom. He *is* king. Make no mistake about it. He *has* a kingdom: "My kingdom." This kingdom, however, does not originate in this world. It originates from heaven. But the origin determines its *nature*. It is not *this*-worldly, but *other*-worldly. It is heavenly.

The proof is plain and abundant. First, it stands in the nature of the case. That which comes from heaven, specifically, from God through the crucified and risen Christ in the Spirit of Christ, must be as heavenly as its source.

Second, the heavenly nature of the kingdom is indicated by the implication that Jesus drew from the heavenly origin

of His kingdom: His servants do not fight. The servants do not fight to defend their king from death. They do not fight to promote the kingdom. They do not use physical force, or the threat of it, to extend or maintain the kingdom. Jesus referred to the prohibition against physical force that He had given to Peter in the garden: “Put up thy sword into the sheath” (John 18:10, 11). This is a law concerning the defense and promotion of the kingdom until the end of this age. Unmistakably, it describes the kingdom as spiritual. Being spiritual, the kingdom of God can only be promoted and defended by spiritual means. This spiritual means is the Word of God (II Cor. 10:3-5).

Third, that Jesus’ description of the origin of His kingdom was also the description of its heavenly nature is proved from Jesus’ statement in John 18:37 that He establishes and promotes His kingdom by bearing witness to the truth. The kingdom of God is the oddest kingdom that ever there was. Winston Churchill once remarked about all earthly kingdoms in wartime that “the first casualty of war is truth.” Although the kingdom of God is always at war in history, it employs only the truth for its defense and advancement. This is clear testimony by Christ that His kingdom is heavenly.

Fourth, there is proof of the heavenly nature of the kingdom of God in the conclusion that Pilate came to on the basis of Jesus’ word in verse 36, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Pilate concluded that the kingdom of Jesus was no threat to Rome as the Jewish leaders had made it out to be—a threat by plots of sedition, by physical force, by revolution. “I find in him no fault” was the verdict of the representative of Rome, who had an eagle-eye for rival kings and kingdoms (John 18:38).

The heavenly *origin* of the kingdom of God, taught by Jesus in John 18:33-40, determines its heavenly *nature*. This was the understanding of the Scottish Presbyterian, James Bannerman.

Christ seeks to disabuse the mind of Pilate, in regard

Kingdom of God

to the nature of His Church, of the idea that it might be like any of the powers of this world, established or upheld by force; He tells him that it is spiritual in its nature and authority, and therefore not liable to become an object of jealousy to the state, as trenching upon its authority or jurisdiction (*The Church of Christ*, vol. 1, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1974, p. 163).

The virtual definition of the kingdom of God in Romans 14:17 proves the kingdom to be spiritual, not physical: “The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.” These spiritual realities are what the kingdom essentially is. The kingdom of God is not anything earthly whatever.*

* For a fuller defense of the spirituality of the Messianic kingdom of God, especially against the carnal kingdom of postmillennial Christian Reconstruction, see David J. Engelsma, *Christ's Spiritual Kingdom: A Defense of Reformed Amillennialism* (Redlands, CA: The Reformed Witness, 2001).

5

The Kingdom Is the Church

The spirituality of the kingdom of God is offensive to multitudes today. That many stumble over the spiritual

nature of the kingdom of God grieves us. But it does not surprise us. Exactly this was the offense of the kingship and kingdom of the Messiah to the Jews of Jesus' own day.

According to John 6, the Jews had their hearts set on a carnal, political kingdom with earthly power, prosperity, and peace. This was how they understood the Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messianic kingdom, e.g., Psalm 2, Psalm 72, Isaiah 2, Isaiah 11, and Isaiah 65. The Jews stumbled over the spirituality of the kingdom of God in the Messiah. This was the rock of offense that dashed them to pieces both nationally and personally. Nationally, they repudiated the king who rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, dies on a cross, and exercises sovereign power by the preaching of Christ crucified. And nationally they perish in the judgment of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The kingdom is taken from them and given to the believing, largely Gentile church (Matt. 21:43). Personally, the Jews who want to place an earthly crown on Jesus' head "went back and walked no more with him" (John 6:66).

To His closest disciples, Jesus then put a question that concerned the kind of king and kingdom they desired: "Will ye also go away?" (John 6:67) He puts the same question to us today.

To Reformed and Presbyterian Christians today, the warning is necessary: Beware, lest at this late hour in history you also stumble over the spiritual kingdom of Christ Jesus!

Kingdom of God

Where now, we must ask, is this spiritual kingdom of God? Where does God rule by the Word and Spirit of Jesus Christ? Where are righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost? Where is truth? Where are the people who bow willingly to God in Christ by believing the gospel and obeying the law—obeying the law *truly*, with love in their hearts? Where on earth is there at least the small beginning of God's being all in all?

Where in the past 2000 years or so of New Testament history, since Jesus was exalted as king at God's right hand in the ascension, have there *always* been these realities? Where *alone* have these things been found?

The answer to these questions will be the identification of the kingdom of God.

The answer is: the church. The church is the kingdom of God.

This is the confession of the Reformed faith both among the Reformed churches and among the Presbyterians. The Heidelberg Catechism identifies the keys of the kingdom of heaven as the preaching of the gospel and Christian discipline by which believers are accepted of God in the fellowship of the congregation and by which unbelievers are excluded from the fellowship of God and excommunicated from the church. Thus this creed identifies the church as the kingdom. Thus also, the Catechism teaches that the kingdom is spiritual (L.D. 31). The same Reformed confession explains the second petition of the model prayer, about the coming of the kingdom, this way: "preserve and increase Thy church" (L.D. 48).

The Belgic Confession establishes the identification of the church as the kingdom as Reformed orthodoxy when it declares Christ to be the king of the church: "This church hath been from the beginning of the world, and will be to the end thereof; which is evident from this, that Christ is an eternal King, which, without subjects, cannot be" (Art. 32).

The Westminster Confession of Faith is explicit: "The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the

gospel ... is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ" (25.2). Significantly, the Confession immediately adds, "the house and family of God." The phrase that is added is significant because it shows that the Confession has its eye on I Timothy 3, where the phrase is found. And I Timothy 3 is describing and prescribing the life of the *instituted church*, the church with bishops and deacons. Westminster teaches that the local congregation that displays the marks of the true church is the kingdom of Jesus Christ in the world.

Recent hesitation on the part of Reformed and Presbyterian people bluntly to confess, "The church is the kingdom of God," is strange and ominous departure from the Reformed confessions. Much more reprehensible is the open criticism of this confession by Reformed and Presbyterian officebearers, who have vowed to uphold the confessions.

***To Reformed and Presbyterian Christians today,
the warning is necessary:
Beware, lest at this late hour in history
you also stumble over the spiritual kingdom
of Christ Jesus!***

This recent hesitancy and opposition are also notable departure from the doctrine of Luther and Calvin. Calvin's commentary on Amos 9:13 expressed the Reformer's position on the matter of the church and the kingdom.

The Spirit under these figurative expressions declares, that the kingdom of Christ shall in every way be happy and blessed, or that the Church of God, *which means the same thing*, shall be blessed, when Christ shall begin to reign (*Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950, p. 410; emphasis added).

Kingdom of God

His commentary on Amos 9 is especially telling because the passage prophesies the coming kingdom of the Messiah and describes this kingdom in the typical language of earthly power, prosperity, and peace that both kinds of millennialists love to take literally.

Louis Berkhof accurately described the view of the Reformers:

The Reformers did not formulate a doctrine of the Kingdom as clear-cut and elaborate as that of the Middle Ages, nor could they point to such a concrete embodiment of the earthly reign of Christ as the Church of Rome. They agreed in identifying it with the invisible Church, the community of the elect, or of the saints of God. For them it was first of all a religious concept, the reign of God in the hearts of believers, the *regnum Christi spirituale* or *internum*. At the same time they did not overlook its ethical implications, as Ritschl often contends. One and all they opposed the fanatical attempts of the Anabaptists and their kin, to set up in the world an external Kingdom of God; and recognized the legitimacy of the authority of civil governments, though their relation to the Church was a matter of dispute among them. They did not expect the external visible form of the Kingdom of God until the glorious appearance of Jesus Christ (*The Kingdom of God*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951, p. 24).

In identifying the church as the kingdom, the Reformed confessions are biblical. The issue is virtually decided by Scripture's teaching that the kingdom is not earthly, or carnal, but heavenly and spiritual. Some of these passages, I have brought up and explained in previous chapters.

One outstanding text is Colossians 1:13: "Who ... hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son." When Paul wrote the Colossians that they and all believ-

ers had been translated by the gospel into the kingdom of God's dear Son, what did those Colossians understand by "the kingdom of God's dear Son"? What did they understand this kingdom to be when the apostle declared that the main blessing to be enjoyed in this kingdom is "redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins" (v. 14)? Does anyone suppose that the Colossians understood the kingdom to be some earthly rule that dominated culture and "Christianized" society? Does anyone question that the Colossians understood the kingdom to be Christ's church?

In addition to the texts that teach that God's kingdom is spiritual, the following passages of Scripture are among those that plainly teach that the church is the kingdom of God. There is the well-known word of Jesus Christ to Peter after the disciple confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Matt. 16:18, 19).

The passage explicitly mentions the church: "I will build my church." To the church is given "the keys of the kingdom of heaven." These keys are the spiritual power to bind in sin or loose from sin and thus admit into or exclude from the kingdom of heaven. Only the kingdom itself exercises its keys. The church, therefore, is the kingdom of heaven. This is confirmed by the Lord's teaching that the church fights the gates of hell. The church fights the gates of hell inasmuch as she is the kingdom of heaven fighting the kingdom of the devil, sin, and death.

The beatitudes in Matthew 5 and indeed the entire "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew 5-7 identify the church as the

Kingdom of God

kingdom. This sermon by the king of the kingdom Himself describes the law and life of the kingdom of heaven. And this law and life are the law and life of the church.

Likewise, all the parables of Jesus prove that the church is the kingdom. The parables teach various aspects of the kingdom of heaven: “The kingdom is like unto” And the realm thus described, the realm where these aspects of the kingdom are reality, is the church. To take one example, where is it that the king forgives his servants ten thousand talents so that the servants are called to forgive each other, as is taught in the parable in Matthew 18:21-35? Christ Himself gives the answer in Matthew 18:20: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name” and where Christ is “in the midst of them.” This realm—the kingdom of heaven—is emphatically not a legendary godly Scotland, or a mythical Christian America, or a “Christianized” world, or a fantastic Jewish state in Palestine. It is the church. It was the church in Jesus’ day, no matter how numerically small, physically powerless, and culturally insignificant by the standards of man. It is the church today. And it will be the church until the day that Christ returns.

Once more, by the church is meant the universal body of Jesus Christ made up of all the elect who believe the gospel and obey the law as this body manifests herself in the local congregation of believers and their children.

The church is the kingdom of God. ◻

6

The Church As Kingdom

Identifying the church as the kingdom of God adds something to our understanding of the church. Knowing herself as the Messianic kingdom of God, the church will conduct herself accordingly. Viewing the church of which they are members as Christ's kingdom, believers and their children will think of themselves as citizens and will behave themselves in a way that befits this kingdom.

The church is not only the body of Christ, living from its head and growing up into its head.

The church is not only the bride of Christ, knowing the love of her husband, giving herself to Him, and submitting to His will.

The church is also a kingdom in the world. The church is the kingdom of God. The church is the Messianic kingdom of God, the fulfillment of Old Testament Israel, the realization of Psalm 72, Amos 9, and all the other Old Testament prophecies of the coming glorious, powerful, prosperous, and peaceful reign of God in the Messiah.

Kingly Government

What light this sheds on ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church), how this affects the church's own life and work, and how this forms the life of each member of the church are subjects that need development among us. This is not to say that nothing has been done by the Reformed churches to work out the implications of the truth that the church is the

Kingdom of God

kingdom. Especially in the area of church government, the Presbyterian and Reformed churches have applied the reality of kingdom to the life of the church. The church takes form as an organization. This organization has a government. The church does not simply function as a living body by the secret workings of the indwelling Spirit. She does not simply live by the ardent love that a bride feels for her beloved husband. Christ is king of the church. He rules the church by His Word. His Word is law for the church. He exercises His kingship through a body of elders, whom He calls into holy office. These men are rulers in the church. They administer the Word of the king.

King Jesus also governs the necessary federated (covenant) life and shared work of the congregations in a denomination. He rules through the stated assemblies (classis and synod, or presbytery and general assembly), which are bound to an adopted church order—a kind of “constitution” of the kingdom (and, therefore, not to be tinkered with continually, or changed every few decades!)—that regulates the life and work of the denomination according to Holy Scripture. Christ is king of the denomination of faithful churches. The Messianic kingdom extends to the denomination of faithful churches.

Presbyterian and Reformed churches have taken the kingship of Christ in the matter of church government with utmost seriousness. They have been convinced that at stake in controversies over right church government is the kingdom of God. The Reformed conviction that, as regards church government, the church is the kingdom of God has produced martyrs. At the time of the Reformation, scores of thousands of Reformed Christians died at the hands of the Roman Catholic Church and its political allies, in the Netherlands, France, and other countries, for refusing to submit to the hierarchical authority of the pope. In the seventeenth century, many Scottish Presbyterians died because they would not allow the king of England and his archbishop to intrude upon the presbyterial government of the Presbyterian church in Scotland.

The issue for these saints was, as the Scottish Presbyterians put it, the “crown rights of king Jesus.” The issue was

the crown rights of king Jesus *in the church*. The issue was the church as the kingdom of God.

The importance that church government has as an aspect of the kingdom of God in the thinking of Reformed churches is apparent in Article 28 of the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). Although the article recognizes that the consistory may claim the protection of the authorities for the possession of their property and the peace and order of their meetings, it warns that the consistory “may never suffer the royal government of Christ over His church to be in the least infringed upon.”

This warning is timely. Anti-Christian, totalitarian states regard the church as the last and most dangerous threat to their absolute power. They try to bring the church to heel, and thus absorb her into the kingdom of Satan, by tempting or terrorizing her to subject herself to the lordly will of the state rather than to the will of the Lord Jesus. The day is not far off in the nominally Christian West that civil government will demand that the church give “equal rights” to women by decreeing their ordination to special office and that the church cease her “hate crime” of condemning homosexuality and disciplining impenitent homosexuals. The penalty, as Article 28 of the Church Order of the PRC indicates, will be the seizure of the church’s property and the disruption of the peace and order of the church’s meetings.

The issue will be the kingdom of God.

The church is a nation, or kingdom (I Pet. 2:9). She is a sovereign nation. She permits no meddling in her government by any other kingdom, or nation. For a consistory or a synod to allow the authority of some earthly prince to override the authority of Christ in the congregation or denomination is treason. The German churches were guilty of this in the 1930s and 1940s when they cravenly permitted Hitler to rule in the churches. They lowered the banner of the kingdom of God and ran up the flag of the Third Reich. The churches in the World Council of Churches similarly capitulated to the Communist tyrannies.

Viewing the Church as Kingdom

But the truth that the church is the kingdom of God has application to far more than only the government of the church. The whole doctrine of the church can and must be seen in light of the kingdom of God. That the church is the kingdom has implications for every aspect of the life and work of the church. To my mind, this has not been sufficiently developed among us. We have developed the doctrine of the church as the body and bride of Christ. We have developed the truth of the covenant and its relation to the church. But as regards the kingdom of God, particularly the relation of the kingdom and the church, we are lacking.

Reformed theologians have proved that the church is the fulfillment—the New Testament reality—of Old Testament Israel. The work by O. T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), comes immediately to mind. Thus, the theologians have proved that the church is the kingdom. And Reformed people understand this. They are not dreaming the “Jewish dream” of a future carnal kingdom of converted Jews in Palestine (premillennial dispensationalism), or of a future earthly kingdom of Presbyterians holding and wielding absolute political power in North America and even over all the world (postmillennial Christian Reconstruction).

But Reformed theologians have not thoroughly worked out, in light of Holy Scripture, what the church looks like as the millennial kingdom of God. They have not shined the light of the kingdom upon every aspect of the church’s existence and every detail of her activity and work. The result is that to some extent the church itself does not live in the consciousness that it is the kingdom of God—the glorious, powerful, prosperous, peaceful kingdom of God in Jesus Christ, the kingdom of Psalm 72. To some extent, the church itself does not work in the lively consciousness that its work is the aggressive maintenance and extension of itself in the world by the kingdom of the Father of Jesus Christ — the coming of the kingdom of the second petition of the model prayer. To some extent, the church does not fight its battles in the consciousness that it is the host of God Almighty, “terrible as

an army with banners” (Song of Solomon 6:4)—the reality of David’s army with its mighty men.

Our ministers should make such a study of the church as the kingdom. One way to do this is to preach the Heidelberg Catechism from the viewpoint of the kingdom of God with special emphasis on the kingdom-nature of the church.

It may well be that the popularity of the millennial errors that have been troubling Protestant churches for the past 200 years is due in part to the weakness of the church on the doctrine of the kingdom. Both forms of millennialism, post-millennialism as well as premillennialism, are not so much a false teaching of the last things as they are a false teaching of the Messianic kingdom of God. Often, the arising of doctrinal error in the church is indicative of the church’s failure to grasp or do justice to the truth that is at issue.

*Both forms of millennialism,
postmillennialism as well as premillennialism,
are not so much a false teaching of the last things
as they are a false teaching of the Messianic
kingdom of God.*

Whatever may be the cause of the popular millennial errors, God’s purpose with them as serious doctrinal errors—false doctrines—is that they cause His church to examine more thoroughly, develop more fully, and confess more clearly the truth that these errors subvert, that is, the truth of the kingdom.

Aspects of the Church as Kingdom

Without trying to be exhaustive, I suggest that conceiving and presenting the church as the kingdom will be fruitful in teachings that are both grand in themselves and urgently needed by the Reformed churches today. If the church is the kingdom, Jesus Christ is the absolute sovereign of the

Kingdom of God

church. The head of the church is *king*. As sovereign, He alone establishes, maintains, and perfects the kingdom. As sovereign, He alone makes and preserves the citizens. As sovereign, He alone determines the life and behavior of both the church and the individual member. In a good, old-fashioned monarchy, the life of the realm and the life of each citizen are simply a matter of *being ruled*. What the realm might like and what the citizen might want are irrelevant. The will of the king is all. And the king of the church is eternal God in the flesh. "Where the word of a king is, there is power: and who may say unto him, What doest thou?" (Eccles. 8:4)

If the church is the kingdom, there is and must be discipline. The flagrantly and impenitently rebellious and disobedient must be excommunicated. There is no place in the kingdom for them. To let them remain would be to jeopardize the kingdom. But there must also be order; prescribed, right worship; one faith; a definite way of life for all the citizens; co-operation among the citizens; regard for the customs and traditions; and the training of the young to revere the king, love the kingdom, and live the life of the kingdom.

What a disorderly business is the life of many churches today. Gross, public sinners are leading citizens. The members believe and do as they please. Many do not even regularly and diligently attend the services of worship on the Lord's Day. And the church tolerates it! Some kingdom! Churches resemble Israel in the time of the judges, when everyone did what was right in his own eyes, because there was no king in Israel.

If the church is the kingdom, the church must be driven with the urge to expand the territory, to press the claims of the king still more widely, indeed to raise the banners of the kingdom of God over all the nations. This is missions and all the witness of the church, but it is *kingdom-missions*. This makes a difference. For one thing, it keeps missions from being a sentimental effort to save souls for Jesus, which invariably corrupts the message in the interests of more souls and thus results in no souls at all. A church that knows itself as the kingdom of God will be motivated to glorify God in

missions. This church will not water down the message of the gospel of the glory of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, much less concoct a new message that is more to the liking of the time and culture.

For another thing, kingdom-missions will not overlook that aspect of the Great Commission that is widely ignored today: “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). Entrance into the kingdom must be followed by a life in the kingdom of obeying all of Christ’s commands.

If the church is the kingdom, the church must know itself as a fighting force, an army that confronts enemies, demolishes fortresses, and even destroys people. Kingdoms are at war in history. As much as in the Old Testament, the kingdom of Christ in the time of the new covenant is commissioned by God to do battle against the hordes of devils, the apostate churches, and the world of reprobate, ungodly men and women. “The Lord at thy right hand shall strike through kings in the day of his wrath. He shall judge among the heathen, he shall fill the places with the dead bodies; he shall wound the heads over many countries” (Ps. 110:5, 6).

How this is deplored and rejected in most of the churches today! How this is in danger of being lost today even in the most faithful of churches! Love, tolerance, friendliness, sweetness, and niceness are the only attributes of the church! The result is that the kingdom of darkness—“the gates of hell”—is rolling over these defenseless churches with a spiritual blitzkrieg.

But what if the church is the kingdom of God, really the New Testament reality of David’s warring kingdom, the kingdom whose king is the king of kings of Revelation 19:11 ff.? How will this make a difference in the pulpit, in the decisions of the consistory and the synod, in the lectures and writing of the professors of theology, and in the witness of the members? □

7

***The Kingdom in the Lives
of the Citizens***

No one should fear identifying the church as the kingdom because he supposes that this limits the extent of the kingdom in the world. This is the fear of some. They think that the kingdom would be shut up in the narrow confines of the instituted church. In fact, one of the main charges made by postmillennial Christian Reconstruction against the identification of the church as the kingdom is that “this equation of the Church with the kingdom of Christ evades the issue of Christendom: the wider influence of the gospel in history” (Gary North, *Crossed Fingers*, Tyler, TX, Institute for Christian Economics, 1996, p. 59).

The mistaken notion of “Christendom” aside, this fear is groundless.

The truth that the church is the kingdom does full justice to the fullest extension of the kingdom in all the world, among all nations, and in every sphere of human life. Since the kingdom is the reign of God in Jesus Christ, the reign of God in Jesus Christ extends over all the world.

**The Extension of the Kingdom
in the Gathering of the Church**

For one thing, the church is the servant that God uses to translate those for whom the kingdom has been eternally prepared out of the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom

of the Son of His love. This translation is accomplished by the church's preaching of the gospel, whether among the children of believers or on the mission field. In connection with this saving work of God, churches are established at home and abroad.

Thus the kingdom is extended.

Having called men, women, boys, and girls to the kingdom, the church continues to instruct and discipline these citizens in the life of the kingdom (Matt. 28:20).

The history of the church in the present age is proof that identification of the church as the kingdom does not result in restricting the kingdom, but rather in extending it over all the world. By the preaching, first, of the apostles and, then, of faithful ministers and missionaries, the kingdom spread from Jerusalem throughout the world in the form of true churches of Jesus Christ in all nations.

This spread of the kingdom in the form of true churches in all nations is the discipling of the nations that Christ mandated in Matthew 28:19: "Teach [Greek: 'disciple'] all the nations." In the conversion, salvation, and sanctification of the elect in all nations, regardless that they are and always have been a minority, and in the gathering of them as a church, the nations become disciples of Christ.

Not only is the church instrumental in the extension of the kingdom worldwide, it is also the agent by which the kingdom is maintained. The church defends the kingdom of God. The church defends the kingdom of God by defending the gospel of the kingdom. The Messianic kingdom of God is always under attack, as the history of Israel in the Old Testament and the book of Revelation make plain. Only where a true church proclaims the gospel of sovereign grace and teaches an authoritative law of God as the rule of the life of the saints is the kingdom to be found.

Identification of the church as the kingdom in no way hinders, but in every way promotes the extension of the kingdom.

Kingdom of God

The Extension of the Kingdom in the Lives of the Citizens

For another thing, by the same royal Word by which people are naturalized as citizens of the kingdom of God, the church teaches and disciplines these people to live the life of the kingdom in every sphere of human life and in every ordinance of creation.

The kingdom of God—the reign of God in Christ—is extended *in the life of every genuine member of the church*. And the life of the member of the church is to be lived *in the world*. In the world, he lives the life of the kingdom as a citizen of this kingdom. This is a life of obedience to Jesus Christ as lord and king. In the life of the member of the church is, and is shown, the reign of God in Christ by the Spirit.

This is the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 48. In explanation of the second petition of the model prayer, "Thy kingdom come," the Catechism begins with the life of the individual citizen of the heavenly kingdom: "Rule us so by Thy Word and Spirit, that we may submit ourselves more and more to Thee."

The rule of God in the life of the believer begins with his own very personal, spiritual life and experience. The kingdom comes more and more in him when he abhors himself as a sinner, trusts alone in the cross of Christ, loves his king, seeks the glory of God and the good of the neighbor rather than himself, and makes some progress in his fight against doubt, envy, bitterness, discontent, drunkenness, illicit sexual desire, or whatever may be his own besetting demon.

That demon, by the way, promotes the kingdom of Satan in the believer's life. The two kingdoms clash most violently and with the highest stakes, not out there in society in the culture wars. That clash is mere child's play in comparison with the war of the two kingdoms in the soul of every Christian.

To the noisy champions of a grand, showy, outward kingdom that is one day to Christianize the world, this personal spiritual extension of the kingdom is of little account. But to God, Scripture, and the Heidelberg Catechism — as to the

battling believer — it is first and basic. The apostle of Christ virtually *defines* the kingdom in terms of its experience by the individual church member: “For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Rom. 14:17). That the kingdom comes in the life of an elect sinner is a wonder of the almighty, life-giving, gracious power of the Holy Spirit.

The kingdom comes first and importantly in the soul and experience of the child of God. But then it necessarily advances into the active life of the Christian in the world in every sphere and ordinance, with body and soul and with all his gifts.

As a citizen of the kingdom, he is a member with his family of the church, indeed of the purest manifestation of the church; is diligent in church attendance; submits to Christ’s authority in the elders; uses his gifts for the good of the congregation and denomination; and lives in peace with the other members as much as possible.

As a citizen of the kingdom, the Reformed man marries in the Lord, loves his wife, honors marriage as a lifelong bond, rears his children in the truth, and rules his household well.

As a citizen of the kingdom, the Reformed woman marries in the Lord, submits to her husband with due obedience, honors marriage as a lifelong bond, is a “keeper at home,” brings up her children in the faith, and cooperates with her husband’s rule.

As citizens of the kingdom, the parents establish good Christian schools, to carry out the godly instruction of the children of the kingdom that they themselves cannot give.

As a citizen of the kingdom, the man labors faithfully in his job, whatever it is, high-powered or menial, as to the Lord, to provide for his own needs and for those of the kingdom. This includes that he recognizes and submits to the authority of his employer. If he is the employer, he treats his workers justly and pays them well.

As a citizen of the kingdom, the believer honors civil government as God’s servant, submits to the authority of the

Kingdom of God

state and its functionaries, obeys all laws that do not require him to disobey God, and pays the taxes that the state decrees. If he is the ruler, which is perfectly proper, although quite rare, he keeps order in society, legislates in accordance with the law of God for national life, punishes those who disturb the common order, and protects those who are outwardly law-abiding.

As a citizen of the kingdom, the member of the church is honest and kind in his dealings with his neighbors, whether believing or unbelieving, and helpful to the needy as he has opportunity. As much as possible, he lives in peace with all men.

As a citizen of the kingdom, the Christian freely uses and enjoys the good creation of God his king, always in service of the kingdom and to the glory of the king of the kingdom. This creation, freely used and enjoyed, includes his own natural gifts of music, or art, or scientific study, or poetry, or gardening, or athletics, and much more besides.

***The two kingdoms clash most violently
and with the highest stakes,
not out there in society in the culture wars.
That clash is mere child's play in comparison with
the war of the two kingdoms in the soul of every Christian.***

Thus, in the active life of the member of the church the kingdom extends into all areas of human life in all the world.

None of the extension is divorced from the church. All of it proceeds from and is empowered by the church as the kingdom of God.

This all-comprehensive, all-invading, all-dominating kingdom-life is also the Reformed "world-and-life-view." It may not be the kingdom-life that Abraham Kuyper grandiosely sketched in his *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), or the triumphalist "world-and-life-view" of the Christian Reconstructionists. But it is the humble, down-

to-earth, realistic kingdom-life and “world-and-life-view” of Ephesians 5:21-6:9; I Peter 2:11-5:14; the book of Titus; Romans 13; I Timothy 4:1-8; and the New Testament generally.

This aspect of the kingdom of God, namely, the extension of the kingdom in the lives of the citizens, is fundamental.

Where is it found today?

Where is it found even as regards those who are clamoring the loudest for a “world-and-life-view”? Where is it found among those who are constantly criticizing the Protestant Reformed Churches for their alleged lack of a broad, victorious kingdom-vision?

Fact is, we Protestant Reformed Christians are sharply critical of many of these “culture-transformers” and “kingdom-builders” exactly for their woeful shortcomings as regards the biblical, Reformed world-view. For all their talk about building and advancing the kingdom, the sin of many Reformed, Presbyterian, and evangelical people today is that they do not teach and live the life of the kingdom of Christ.

Many of them do not even belong to sound Reformed churches. They retain their membership in churches that do not preach the pure doctrine of the gospel, churches that corrupt the sacraments, and churches that neglect the discipline of public, impenitent sinners. They permit their children to be raised in such churches. All further kingdom-life is impossible where membership in a true church is lacking.

Many do not attend worship services twice every Lord’s Day. They use the Lord’s Day for their own work or pleasure, usually pleasure. Especially in the summer, these enthusiastic transformers of culture spend their Sundays in their boats, or on the beach, or at their cottages, or on the road to and from their vacations. Meanwhile their churches hold services with a handful of old people. It is common knowledge that a popular preacher of the “Reformed world-and-life-view” and the “full-orbed kingdom-life” runs out of the morning service on the Lord’s Day to play golf the rest of the day.

Kingdom of God

Our day is seeing the murder of Sabbath observance by those who profess to be Reformed and Presbyterian. And the murder of Sabbath observance is the end of the kingdom of God among them. Voltaire, atheist philosopher that he was, could teach these Sabbath-desecrating advocates of a “Reformed world-and-life-view” the essential importance of Sabbath observance for the kingdom of God. “If you want to kill Christianity,” that shrewd foe of Christ advised the French Revolution, “you must abolish Sunday.”

Despite the fact that marriage and the family are basic to the kingdom, many of the churches and theologians crying up a future, grand, outward, political, carnal kingdom of Christ tolerate, or even approve, divorce on other grounds than fornication (the only biblical ground for divorce) and the remarriage of divorced persons, with all the accompanying disaster for children, grandchildren, the wider family, the church, and society at large. Christian Reconstruction, for example, approves remarriage after divorce for all — innocent parties and guilty parties — except for someone who might have AIDS (see Rousas J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, n.p.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973, pp. 401-415, and Ray Sutton, *Second Chance: Biblical Principles of Divorce and Remarriage*, Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1988).

To refer to no other corruption of true kingdom-life as prescribed by the Lord in Holy Scripture, in the vital creation ordinance of labor many of those who are vehement for the transforming of culture approve the subversion of the ordinance of labor by labor unionism. Either they themselves are members of a labor union, or they approve membership in the unions on the part of those with whom they regularly celebrate the Lord’s Supper.

Every labor union stands before God and men with blood dripping from its hands. In enforcing their strikes, they have wounded and killed innumerable men and women who have opposed them, especially the “scabs.” And the strike itself, the heart and soul of the union, is sheer, obvious rebellion by the workers against the God-given authority of the employer. By membership in a labor union, one makes himself responsible for the violence of the “brotherhood” and becomes

party to the rebellion of labor against what Scripture calls the “master.”

Against all this conformity to the culture of the ungodly, we Protestant Reformed churches and people vigorously promote, insist on, and, by the grace of God, begin to *live* the kingdom-life and *practice* a Reformed world-view.

Not apart from the church!

The church is the kingdom.

The natural eye cannot see it, for by earthly reckoning the church is small, powerless, and even shameful.

But to the eye of faith, which sees Christ the king in the church, the church is great, invincible, and glorious.

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King. God is known in her palaces for a refuge.... Walk about Zion, and go round about her: tell the towers thereof. Mark ye will her bulwarks, consider her palaces; that ye may tell it to the generation following (Ps. 48:1-3, 12, 13).

And out of the church is our spiritual, our kingdom, life: “All my springs are in thee” (Ps. 87:7). □



**Southwest Protestant Reformed Church
Evangelism Committee
4875 Ivanrest
Grandville, MI 49418**

Cover Art by Randy Looyenga and Albert Meijer