

# The Kingdom of God

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## Introduction

A subject that on the surface appears very simple, yet which has produced an extensive bibliography of complex articles, as well as strong disagreements among evangelical theologians is the kingdom of God. Indeed, there are at least as many views of the kingdom of God as there are eschatological<sup>1</sup> schools of thought. There are those who argue that the kingdom of God is something totally in the future (e.g., dispensational premillennialism), that it must await the second bodily coming of Christ who will then set up a literal, political kingdom centered in Jerusalem. Historical premillennialists (such as George E. Ladd) take the position that the kingdom is a present reality, that Christ is presently reigning as king, but that this reign is “veiled, unseen and unrecognized by the world,”<sup>2</sup> that “Christ’s reign is only potential and unrealized.”<sup>3</sup> In other words the effects of Christ’s kingship upon the nations are rather insignificant. Real, visible kingdom rule and victory must await the second coming of our Lord.

Others want to restrict the kingdom of God to the church alone. As Ronald Hanks asserts, “[a]ny attempt to make the kingdom something broader than or other than the church is wrong.”<sup>4</sup> Hanks’s view flows from a retreatist, pessimistic, amillennial eschatology. The amillennial paradigm of the kingdom in the present world is one of the church as a tiny remnant in a sea of unbelief, hostility and rank paganism until our Lord returns. Herman Hoeksema writes,

They share by faith in the victory which Christ has gained for them. And in the consciousness of that victory, they fight the good fight of faith: not, indeed, in the hope that they can make a kingdom of God out of the present world, but living the kingdom-life in every sphere of life and representing the cause of the Son of God in the midst of a world that lieth in darkness. Therefore, they put on the whole armor of God, considering it grace that, in the cause of Christ, they may not only believe in Him but also suffer with Him. For they know that as citizens of the kingdom of heaven they are still in Babylon. And in Babylon, in this world, they do not expect an outward victory. They know that in the world, they shall have tribulation: for as that world hated their King, so they will hate them if they are faithful.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Eschatology refers to the study of final things (e.g., death, the rapture, final judgment, the second coming, etc.).

<sup>2</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 63.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>Ronald Hanks, “Kingdom Church in ‘Christian’ Reconstruction” in Robert D. Decker, ed., *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Seminary, 1998), 32:1, 31.

<sup>5</sup>Herman Hoeksema, *In the Sanctuary: Expository Sermons on the Lord’s Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1981 [1941]), 52. When Hoeksema discusses the error of people making a kingdom of God out of the world presumably by their own humanistic efforts we heartily agree. Such thinking is the backbone of modernism in all its forms. We can also heartily agree that believers must live the kingdom life in every sphere of life. We do not understand, however, given the promises from God of the great victory of the gospel throughout the world why Hoeksema has such tremendous pessimism. Both premillennialists and amillennialists view the Great Commission as a colossal failure. In fairness to our amillennial brothers we should point out that the Protestant Reformed Church represents

Although the early church lived in a pagan empire and suffered persecution and there are periods of church history in which the enemies of Christ appear to have the upper hand, the paradigm that Jesus Himself set before the apostles for the church in the world was not Israel living under punishment in Babylon but Joshua and Israel marching into the promised land with victory after victory. This is the message of the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19; read 18-20). Pessimistic amillennialism restricts the meaning of the kingdom of God because it views the Great Commission as a pipe dream doomed for failure. It assumes (without biblical warrant) that the nations of this world will never and can never come under the direct influence of the gospel and God’s law-word.

A consistent postmillennial eschatology recognizes that the doctrine of the kingdom of God contains a number of different elements and that while the church occupies the central role in the kingdom, our Lord’s rule will extend to all nations and earthly institutions. It is a great error to suppose that since Jesus’ kingdom is spiritual in nature that it can have no connection with things that are political, secular or that it is not directly connected with the visible church. Because the Bible speaks of the resurrected Savior holding a universal dominion (e.g., Mt. 28:18; Eph. 1:22; 1 Cor. 15:27, etc.), subduing His enemies in history (e.g., Ps. 2:8ff; 110; Dan. 7:13, 14, etc.), and of a genuine acceptance of Christianity among all nations (e.g., Ps. 22:27-27; 72:8-11; 86:9; Isa. 42:1, 3-4, etc.), the kingdom in its broadest sense is obviously wider than the church. The various issues raised above will receive further elucidation as we consider this topic below.

## I. Defining the Kingdom

In order to understand the meaning of the kingdom of God (or heaven) one must make a distinction between God’s reign, dominion or sovereignty over the universe as Lord, the Almighty, King, creator, sustainer and ruler over all and the mediatorial reign of Christ which was conferred upon Him as a result of His redemptive obedience. The triune God (the eternal Son included) has dominion over all as an aspect of His nature. Jehovah is sovereign. Thus, God is frequently referred to in the Bible as the great King. “The LORD is King forever and ever” (Ps. 10:16). “Who is the King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle” (Ps. 24:8). “The LORD sat enthroned at the flood, and the LORD sits as King forever” (Ps. 29:10). “For the LORD most high is awesome; He is a great King over all the earth” (Ps. 47:2). “For the LORD is the great God, and the great King above all gods” (Ps. 95:3). God as God is sovereign, all powerful, all knowing, everywhere present, the great law-giver, the giver of life and judge over all. Thomas Watson writes,

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about the most pessimistic form of amillennialism on the Reformed scene today. Note further that not all amillennialists restrict the kingdom of God to the church. Berkof writes, “*It is closely related to the church, though not altogether identical with it.* The citizenship of the kingdom is co-extensive with the membership in the invisible church. Its field of operation, however, is wider than that of the church, since it aims at the control of life in all its manifestations” (L. Berkof, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939], 409).

His greatness appears by the effects of his power. He “made heaven and earth,” and can unmake it. Psa cxxiv 8. With a breath he can crumble us to dust; with a word he can unpin the world, and break the axle-tree of it in pieces. “He poureth contempt upon princes.” Job xii 21. “He shall cut off the spirit of princes.” Psa. lxxvi 12. He is Lord paramount, who does whatever he will. Psa cxv 3. He weigheth “the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance.” Isa xl 12.... Though he has many heirs, yet no successors. He sets up his throne where no other king does; he rules the will and affections; his power binds the conscience. Angels serve him, all the kings of the earth hold their crowns and diadems by immediate tenure from this great King. “By me Kings reign,” Prov viii 15. To this Lord Jehovah all kings must give account, and from his tribunal there is no appeal.<sup>6</sup>

The central meaning of the kingdom of God concerns Christ’s authority and rule as a reward for His redemptive obedience. It is not simply Jesus ruling as God but Christ the mediator, the God-man reigning over a kingdom of grace. William Symington writes, “The sovereign authority of Christ may be viewed either as *necessary*, or as *official*. Viewing him as *God*, it is necessary, inherent, and underived: viewing him as *Mediator*, it is official and delegated. It is the latter of these that we are now to contemplate. The subject of our present inquiry is, the MEDIATORIAL DOMINION of the Son; not that which essentially belongs to him as God, but that with which, by the authoritative act of the Father, he has been officially invested as the Messiah. It is that government, in short, which was *laid* upon his shoulders—that power which was *given* unto him in heaven and in earth.”<sup>7</sup>

This point raises the following questions. Why is there a need for this kind of King and this type of kingdom? Why does not God simply continue to rule as God? The answer to this question is that a divine-human mediator, a soteriological king was and is needed because of the fall of Adam. Before he sinned, Adam was commanded to populate the earth and exercise dominion (cf. Gen. 1:28). If man had not fallen there would have been a worldwide civilization living in direct fellowship and communication with Jehovah. The whole human race would have constituted a kingdom under the direct loving rule of God. Under God’s direct rule and continuous revelation mankind would have progressively mastered the environment to God’s glory. All of man’s endeavors (science, art, architecture, agriculture, technology, etc.) would have been developed with a love toward God and man. The fall of man in Adam, however, rendered the idea of a God-glorifying culture, kingdom or civilization impossible apart from a salvation provided for a people by God Himself. Because of the fall, the human race is guilty before God and polluted by sin. All men are dead spiritually (Eph. 2:1-5), hate the truth, turn to idols (Rom. 1:18 ff.), dwell in darkness (Jn. 1:4-5), have a heart of stone (Ezek. 11:19), are helpless (Ezek. 16:4-6), cannot repent (Jer. 13:23), cannot see or comprehend divine truth (1 Cor. 2:14) and are slaves of Satan (Ac. 26:17-18). James Orr writes, “The background of the whole picture in the Old Testament is that of a world in revolt, turned aside from God, sunk, and ever sinking deeper, in unrighteousness, abandoned to idolatry and to the lusts and corruptions which are the natural fruit of apostasy from the Creator, B a world in contrariety to the divine holiness, and judged as guilty, and justly exposed to the Divine anger.”<sup>8</sup>

The soteriological kingship of Christ can only be truly understood against the background of the pre-fall dominion mandate and the spiritual death, rebellion against God, slavery to sin and

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<sup>6</sup>Thomas Watson, *The Lord’s Prayer* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1960 [1692, 1890]), 54-55.

<sup>7</sup>William Symington, *Messiah the Prince or, The Mediatorial Dominion of Jesus Christ* (Pittsburgh: Christian Statesman Press, 1999 [1884]), 3.

<sup>8</sup>James Orr, “Kingdom of God,” H. D. B., II, 844-845 as quoted in George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 81.

subservience to Satan that resulted from the fall. Because of the fall Satan is called “the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4). Jesus repeatedly refers to the devil as “the ruler of this world” (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Our Lord says to the unbelieving Jews, “You are of your father the devil” (Jn. 8:44). The apostle John says that “the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 Jn. 5:19). Satan is called “the ruler of the demons” (Mk. 3:22) and “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2). Satan is said to have a throne (Rev. 2:13) and he exercises such power over the unbelieving world that he (mistakenly) thinks he can offer authority over all the kingdoms of the world to Christ. “Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, ‘All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish’” (Lk. 4:5-6). The kingdoms of the world had been given to Satan not by God but by the kings and citizens of these kingdoms who gave their power and honor to the devil. As Paul says, they have “been taken captive by him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:26).

The coming of Christ and His redemptive-restoration kingdom restores the dominion mandate to its original God glorifying purpose, counteracts the effects of the fall upon the elect of all nations, subdues the enemies of God (and the covenant people), and ultimately restores the whole created order. Given the purpose and goal of the kingdom, the redemptive King is called the second Adam (Rom. 5:12-21), “the first born among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29), “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20) and “the beginning of the creation of God” (Rev. 3:14). Christ’s restorative-recreative role is set forth by Paul when he parallels the first and second creations. “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence” (Col. 1:15-18). Calvin writes, “He is the beginning, because, because he is the first-born from the dead; for in the resurrection there is a restoration of all things, and in this manner the commencement of the second and new creation, for the former had fallen to pieces in the ruin of the first man.”<sup>9</sup>

Christ’s sinless life, atonement and victorious resurrection are the foundation of the regeneration of all things (Rom. 8:18-23). Our Lord’s work is presented in such dramatic cosmic terms because the Bible teaches that sin and the curse have permeated the old creation, reducing it to chaos. In poetic language Jeremiah describes the old creation as rendered dark and chaotic because of sin: “I beheld the earth, and indeed it was without form, and void; and the heavens, they had no light” (4:23). Looking to the future, the prophets described Christ’s redemptive work of restoration as a creation of a new heaven and a new earth: “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Isa. 65:17; cf. 51:16).

The kingdom of God can never be separated from the person and work of Christ. The divine-human mediator definitively conquered sin, death and Satan at the cross and because of His perfect obedience to the Father is given all authority at the resurrection (Mt. 28:18; Eph. 1:22; Phil. 2:8, 10; Heb. 1:22; Rev. 5:11-13, etc.). Although the Bible speaks of the kingdom coming during Jesus’ earthly ministry (Mt. 12:28; Lk. 16:16) and being established with power at the resurrection (Mk. 9:1; Rom. 1:4) one must not forget that the judicial foundation of the kingdom reaches all the way back to the proto-evangelium (Gen. 3:15). Christ’s work is the basis for the covenant of grace. His atoning death is what lies behind the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David.

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<sup>9</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 153.

All the acts of mercy and grace in the old covenant flow from the cross of Christ. Although the phrase “kingdom of heaven” is not found within the Old Testament, the old covenant Scriptures have a lot to say about the coming Messiah-King-Redeemer. Indeed, the central focus of the Old Testament is the coming Messiah’s salvation and rule.

There are many types, ceremonies and temporal deliverances that all point to Jesus Christ. Indeed, the burnt offerings and the whole sacrificial system set forth in types and ceremonies the necessity of a more perfect sacrifice—the vicarious death of Jesus Christ. It was in the temple (behind the altar where the clean animals without spot or blemish were slain) in the holy of holies that the special presence of God dwelt above the throne. The nation of Israel and the church of the old covenant were a kingdom in *embryonic* form (Rev. 12:1-2) celebrating, worshiping and looking with the eyes of faith to the coming redeemer—King Jesus.

It is through the Old Testament prophets that biblical teaching concerning the coming kingdom and the Savior-Messiah-King comes into focus. The prophets taught that an anointed One was coming who would bring deliverance and salvation to God’s people (cf. Isa. 34:12; 44:6; Zeph. 3:15). This king will come from the lineage of David (2 Sam. 7:8-17; Ps. 132:11-12; Isa. 11:1-5; Jer. 23:5ff; Ezek. 34:23ff; 37:24ff). “The localization of God’s throne in Jerusalem, and the virtual identification of the Davidic dynasty with the manifestation of God’s lordship in the earth, climaxed Old Testament typical representations of the movement toward the establishment of a messianic kingdom.”<sup>10</sup> He will be born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14) in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). His ministry will be preceded by one (i.e., John the baptizer) who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah (Isa. 40:3-4). The Messiah’s salvation and rule is founded upon His own suffering and death as a substitutionary atonement (Ps. 22; Isa. 53). He will be established in power as the mediatorial king during the period of Daniel’s fourth kingdom; the Roman Empire (Dan. 2:31-45). After His sacrificial death he will rise from the dead (Ps. 2:7; 16:10) and will ascend to heaven to be given universal dominion by God the Father—the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7:9 ff.; Ps. 2; 110). With this authority He shall rule all nations (Ps. 2, 8:5ff, 22:27-28; 72:8-11; 86:6; Isa. 2:2-3; 11:9; Zech. 9:10; Mal. 1:11). As King He will progressively subdue all His enemies (Ps. 2:8 ff; 110; Isa. 9:7; Dan. 2:34-35; 7:26). His kingdom will never end (Isa. 9:6-7; Dan. 2:44; 7:27). Unlike earthly kings He is perfectly just (Zech. 9:9) and is both God (Ps. 45:6-7; 102:25-27; 110:1, 4-5; Isa. 7:14; 9:6-7; Jer. 23:5-6; Mic. 5:2; Mal. 3:1-2) and man (Gen. 3:15; Dt. 18:15, 18; Isa. 7:14; 53; Mic. 5:2). Ridderbos writes, “The coming salvation is imperishable (Isaiah 51:6)...a new heaven and a new earth will come into existence (Isaiah 60:19; 65:17; 66:22); death will be annihilated (Isaiah 25:7ff.); the dead will be raised (Isaiah 26:19). In opposition to the eternal woe of the wicked there will come the eternal bliss of the redeemed (Isaiah 66:24).”<sup>11</sup> The kingdom that Christ inaugurates and brings to earth will progressively grow and then will reach perfection in the consummate kingdom at His second advent.

## Clarification

When discussing the meaning of the kingdom of God it is important to note that the phrase is used in different ways in the New Testament. People who insist on only one meaning (e.g., the church) to the exclusion of other exegetically legitimate understandings of the phrase end up severely restricting the full orbbed meaning of the kingdom. While there is theological justification for

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<sup>10</sup>O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 219.

<sup>11</sup>Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), 5.

speaking of a central or primary meaning of the phrase (the central or primary meaning refers to Christ's reign or kingly dominion wherein [in behalf of the Father] the theanthropic mediator displays divine power and lays a judicial foundation [for a re-creation] by His active and passive obedience to save a people [the elect, the bride, the church] and reasserts God's rights and glory over a fallen earth sunk in idolatry and despair), there are other meanings that are related to the central meaning as spokes radiate outward from an axis.

(1) Sometimes the phrase "kingdom of heaven" refers specifically to the visible church. "And I also say to you that you are Peter [Petros], and on this rock [petra] I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt. 16:18-19). Jesus teaches that the apostles and their successors in the pastoral charge have a ministerial rule in the visible church. There is the key of doctrine, whereby ministers preach the law and gospel unto the masses. No one can enter the visible church (except covenant children) without first hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ and making a credible profession of faith. There also is the key of discipline. The elders have authority to admit people into the visible church and the church ordinances. They also have authority to discipline and even excommunicate those who refuse to repent of heretical teaching or immorality. This authority is not arbitrary or intrinsic but is to be founded upon the teaching of Scripture. In other words, church officers can only discipline church members for violating the word of God.

For the purposes of our study the important thing to note is that the kingdom of verse 19 is equivalent to church in verse 18. "Christ's church visible is his kingdom even on this earth, not an earthly kingdom but a spiritual and heavenly kingdom, wherein he as King of heaven in heavenly things reigns; therefore he calls the church visible *the kingdom of heaven*."<sup>12</sup> The church as the kingdom of God is taught in the Reformed confessions. The Westminster Confession of Faith says, "the visible church...is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ" (25:2). The Confession, following the words of our Lord, identifies the keys of the kingdom as the Ministry of the gospel" and "censures" (30:2-4; see also *The Heidelberg Catechism*—Questions and Answers 83-85; the *Confession of Sueveland* [art. 15]).

(2) Often "the kingdom of God" is used as an equivalent to eternal life or salvation. Jesus used the phrase in such a manner when he spoke to Nicodemus, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:3). It would be absurd to say that one cannot see the visible church unless one is first born again. One cannot observe and experience the consummate kingdom in the future or even salvation in the present apart from a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn. 3:5).

The Bible speaks of entering the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:20; 7:21) and of those who cannot enter the kingdom (Mt. 18:3; 25:34). It discusses those who find it impossible to enter the kingdom without God's power (Lu. 18:24-25; Mk. 10:23-25; Mt. 19:24). It tells us of great sinners (e.g., harlots and tax collectors) who go into God's kingdom before the self-righteous Jewish leaders (Mt. 21:31). Jesus speaks of entering the kingdom of God as the contrast or the opposite of entering into hell fire (Mk. 9:47). The Savior also teaches us of the need to receive the kingdom of God as a little child (Mk. 10:15). If one does not receive it (i.e., believe) he will by no means enter it (Lk. 18:17).

(3) The "kingdom of God" is also used in the sense of a future salvation. This meaning can

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<sup>12</sup>David Dickson, *Matthew* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1981 [1647]), 226.

refer to entering heaven and/or the perfection of the consummate kingdom at Jesus' second coming. Paul repeatedly teaches that professing Christians who do not repent; who walk in habitual patterns of wickedness shall not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5). Referring to believer's resurrected spiritual bodies at the second coming, Paul says "that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 15:50). The apostle exhorts Christians saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God" (Ac. 14:22). He promises Timothy that "the Lord will...preserve me for His heavenly kingdom" (2 Tim. 4:18). James says that God has chosen the poor of this world to be heirs of the kingdom" (Jas. 2:5). Jesus discusses a time when many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 8:11). Our Lord speaks of the kingdom of God as a blessed future realm in which the righteous dead are present while the wicked dead are excluded. "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out" (Lk. 13:28). The Bible teaches that the Messiah's kingdom is a present reality (i.e., The resurrected Savior has all authority over heaven and earth now and His realm of salvation, justice and righteousness is progressively leavening the whole earth.) as well as a future manifestation (i.e., Jesus will return, the saints will be glorified, His enemies will be crushed and cast into the lake of fire and the perfect realization of God's kingdom will be established forever.) Ridderbos writes, "This eschatological (referring to the end of time) character of the kingdom of God preached by Jesus is one of the chief presuppositions of the whole of his *kerygma*, and the references to it are like a golden thread interwoven with the whole texture of the Gospel."<sup>13</sup>

(4) The phrase "kingdom of God" can refer to the privileges and honors connected with the kingdom. "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it" (Mt. 21:43). Israel (the covenant people which, as God's elect nation, had received the law and the means of grace) rejected the Messiah and the gospel. Therefore, they were denied all the privileges of the visible church. Their special standing and elect status (i.e., national election, cf. Rom. 9:6, 27; 11:1-10) were removed because they did not believe and obey the Old Testament and the teachings and person of Jesus Christ. This passage proves that the Jewish nation under the Mosaic economy was indeed a kingdom of God in some sense. The covenant people were to believe in the Messiah to come through faith in the sacrificial types and the promises and were to be ruled by God through His holy law. "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" Ex. 19:5-6). "It was thus possible that Israel could lose its privilege when it did not fulfill the stated condition. And the Lord emphasized Israel's wonderful destiny and solemn responsibility: it was to be a kingdom of priests (the service that was required of them as subject of God's kingdom was thus priestly in nature) and a holy, separated, and pure nation consecrated to God. Then Israel would be a kingdom also in the sense that they would rule with Him (Gen. 17:6; Rev. 1:6)."<sup>14</sup>

(5) The "kingdom of God" can refer to the reign of Christ within the hearts of believers. "Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, 'The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, "See here!" or "See there!" For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you' (Lu. 17:21-22).<sup>15</sup> The Jews were

<sup>13</sup>Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 37.

<sup>14</sup>W. H. Gispen, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 180.

<sup>15</sup>Some commentators favor translating *entos humon* as "in your midst," indicating that the kingdom is present among the Pharisees with Jesus and the disciples. This view is supported by a number of arguments. (1) It is said that ancient papi

expecting the Messiah's reign to be established with military power and visible fanfare. They were looking for a political revolutionary who would use military might to crush Rome and set up a Jewish political kingdom.

Jesus rejected the common conception of the kingdom and instead taught a *spiritual* kingdom, a kingdom founded upon His vicarious suffering (cf. Lk. 24:21, 25-27). Our Lord proclaimed a redemptive, spiritual kingdom, a kingdom entered by being born again, by partaking of the first resurrection. "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn. 3:5). This is a kingdom not of weapons and political might but of meek, humble service to Christ and one's neighbor. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Mt. 5:5). "Behold your king is coming to you, lowly, and sitting on a donkey" (Mt. 21:5). Indeed, Jesus emphatically rejected the efforts of Jews to make Him an earthly political king (cf. Jn. 6:15). He always refused the efforts of the Jews to get Him involved in a conflict with the Roman authorities (e.g., Mt. 22:21; Mk. 12:17; Lu. 20:25; Jn. 8:3 ff., etc.). He declared to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world...My kingdom is not from here" (Jn. 18:36). "First, observe that He did not say 'My kingdom is not *in* this world,' but 'My kingdom is not *of* this world.' Believers are not 'of' this world (17:6), yet they *are* in it."<sup>16</sup> The *source* of Christ's kingdom is found in heaven. "The origin of Jesus' kingship explains its unique character: it is 'not of this world.' Take the whole world as it is. It has produced many earthly kings and rulers. They all sprang out of (*ek*) this world and were kings that corresponded to such an origin. This king Jesus came out of heaven as the Son of God and thus holds a kingship of an entirely different type."<sup>17</sup> "The text does *not* say, as some foolishly teach, that Christ's kingdom is irrelevant to the world; rather, it affirms that the kingdom is not *derived* from earth: 'He was speaking of the *source* of His authority, not the place of His legitimate reign. His kingdom is not *of* this world but it *is* in this world and over it."<sup>18</sup>

God the Father anointed Jesus beyond measure (Mt. 3:16-17) and gave Him all authority in heaven and on earth (Mt. 28:18). The divine-human mediator now sits and reigns from the right hand of God in heaven (Eph. 1:20-21). He sends His Spirit into the hearts of the elect enabling them to see and enter His kingdom (Jn. 3:3, 5). Thus, although our Lord's kingdom power originates in heaven, it operates upon and affects this present world. "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10). Therefore, the key to expanding God's kingdom on earth is preaching the gospel (which will be accompanied by Christ's Spirit sovereignly regenerating people's hearts) and discipling all nations (i.e., teaching and applying the whole counsel of God to every sphere of life).

Paul also rejected an earthly, carnal conception of the kingdom: "The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). When the

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permit such a translation. (2) No where in the New Testament is the kingdom regarded as something internal. (3) It could not be said to the Christ-hating Pharisees that the kingdom was "within" them. (4) Jesus often speaks of men entering the kingdom but never of the kingdom entering men. In opposition to this translation those who favor "within you" offer the following arguments. (1) The context strongly favors "within you" for Jesus had just said the kingdom was not an outward visible entity. (2) The "you" is indefinite, thus it does not apply to the unbelieving Pharisees. (3) The New Testament (Mt. 23:36: "the inside the cup," the LXX (e.g., Isa. 16:11) and inter-testamental literature (e.g., 1 Mac. 4:48) all support the translation "within you." (4) Saying "the kingdom is within you" is not at all inconsistent with New Testament teaching that Christ's kingdom is spiritual. (5) One could add that the translation "within you" was universally accepted by the Latin church fathers.

<sup>16</sup>Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975 [1945]), 2:199.

<sup>17</sup>R. C. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1961 [1943]), 1229.

<sup>18</sup>David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 515. Chilton quotes Gary North, *Backward Christian Soldiers? An Action Manual for Christian Reconstruction* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1984), 4.

apostle exhorts strong believers to exercise restraint for the benefit of weaker brethren, he appeals to the nature of the kingdom. “So far from Christ coming to regulate men’s diet, he came to establish *righteousness* in every sense of that term, *and peace* in all the fullness of its blessings, *and joy in the Holy Ghost*. The kingdom of Christ is spiritual, not carnal.”<sup>19</sup> Hodge writes, “The righteousness, peace and joy intended are those of which the Holy Spirit is the author. Righteousness is that which enables us to stand before God, because it satisfies the demands of the law. It is the righteousness of faith, both objective and subjective; peace is the concord between God and the soul, between reason and conscience, between the heart and our fellow men. And the joy is the joy of salvation; that joy which only those who are in the fellowship of the Holy Ghost ever can experience.”<sup>20</sup>

It is important to emphasize the spiritual nature of Christ’s kingdom because of the current wide-spread popularity of premillennial dispensationalism. Dispensationalists argue that Jesus did indeed come to earth to set up a Jewish, political, worldly, carnal, physically coercive kingdom, a kingdom which would have involved forcible overthrow of the Roman Empire. What occurred, however, (according to dispensationalists) was that the Jews rejected Christ’s offer of the kingdom and therefore our Lord was forced to go to plan B which involved setting up something totally new—the church. Plan A, the earthly, carnal, coercive Jewish kingdom would have to be postponed until Jesus’ second coming. This dispensational scheme ignores: (a) The fact that it was Jesus who refused the Jewish offer of a political, earthly, coercive kingdom and not the other way around (Jn. 6:15; 12:13 ff). (b) The explicit teaching of Jesus that, “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn. 18:36). (c) The overall teaching of the New Testament regarding the spiritual nature of the kingdom (Lu. 17:21; Rom. 14:17; Mt. 5:5; Jn. 18:36; 3:5, etc.). “Christ stated on numerous occasions that the purpose for His first coming was to save His people from their sins, not to establish an immediately full-blown kingdom that would instantaneously crush all the enemies of the Jews....An offer of an earthly kingdom that would establish His immediate reign in Jerusalem is not stated or insinuated anywhere in the gospels. He repeatedly divulges that He came to bring salvation to His people, and that *then* He—through His people—would bring in a kingdom (Dan. 7:18, 22, 27; Mt. 13:31-33; 1 Cor. 15:21-28; 1 Jn. 5:4; Rev. 2:26, 27; 5:10; 12:10).”<sup>21</sup>

(6) The expression “kingdom of God” is sometimes spoken of as a message, as something that can be preached. Jesus said, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent” (Lk. 4:43). Christ sent the apostles “to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (Lk. 9:2; cf. 9:11, 60). Our Lord said to the Pharisees, “The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it” (Lk. 16:16). Paul said, “And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more” (Ac. 20:25).

Preaching the kingdom of God is virtually synonymous with preaching the gospel. Note how Paul equates the message of the kingdom with the truth regarding Jesus. “So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening.... Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him” (Ac. 28:23, 30-31). “Paul

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<sup>19</sup>William S. Plummer, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971 [1870]), 614.

<sup>20</sup>Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1972 [1835]), 425.

<sup>21</sup>Curtis Crenshaw and Grover E. Gunn, III, *Dispensationalism: Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Memphis, TN: Footstool, 1985), 66.

teaches the people about God's kingdom, which is equivalent to teaching them Christ's gospel. For instance, when Paul taught in the synagogue of Ephesus and in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, he taught the people about 'the kingdom of God' and 'the word of the Lord' (19:8, 10). In Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders, the phrases *gospel of God's grace* and *preaching the kingdom* signify the same thing (20:24-25). Likewise, in Rome Paul preached 'the kingdom of God' to the people and tried to persuade them 'concerning Jesus' (see 28:23, 31)."<sup>22</sup>

In Matthew, Jesus goes about "preaching the gospel of the kingdom" (9:35). "He told them of a kingdom of grace and glory, now to be set up under the government of a Mediator: this was gospel indeed, *good news, glad tidings of great joy*."<sup>23</sup> Christ calls the gospel "the word of the kingdom" (Mt. 13:19). "[T]his word shows the way and gives right to the kingdom; it gives an earnest and a beginning of the kingdom of heaven; therefore, it is called *the word of the kingdom*."<sup>24</sup> The gospel of the kingdom demands decisive action of the part of its hearers. "Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.'" (Mk. 1:14-15). Because the critical moment in the redemption of God's people has arrived in which the Son of God has invaded history and is fulfilling the law and the prophets, there is an urgent demand for faith and repentance. Jesus preaches the kingdom and His message is: "repent and believe in the gospel." "Jesus spoke of the work of salvation as the kingdom or reign of heaven in order to indicate the supernatural character, origin, and purpose of our salvation. Our salvation begins in heaven and should redound to the glory of the Father in heaven."<sup>25</sup>

(7) The expression "kingdom of God" is used to describe Christ's work in the whole world. This sense is clearly broader than the visible church and could even be interpreted as a Christian civilization composed of believers and unbelievers. We find this broader meaning in the parable of the tares among the wheat. In this parable a man sows good seed in his field (Mt. 13:24). In our Lord's exposition of this parable He identifies the man as Himself ("the son of man," vs. 37), the good seeds are Christians ("the sons of the kingdom," vs. 38) and "the field is the world" (vs. 38). Jesus comes and establishes many converts or disciples in the world. Satan attempts to destroy Jesus' work in the world (His crop) by mixing hypocrites, or counterfeit Christians among real believers *in the world*. Our Lord is not merely speaking about the church (although the church is included in the terms used), He is speaking of the great conflict that occurs in the field of the world. Satan plants the bad seed not merely to corrupt the visible church but also to corrupt everything that is under Christ's lordship in the world whether the family, civil government, business, etc. When Jesus speaks of the kingdom in verse 41 it is quite clear that He is purging the whole world of evil does not merely the church.<sup>26</sup> "The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all

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<sup>22</sup>Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 961. R. C. Lenski writes, "Paul testified about the whole rule of God's grace, that rule which culminates in glory, in which he made Jesus both Prince and Savior (5:31), both Lord and Christ (3:36). It was the entire plan of salvation. The Jews had it in 'the law of Moses and the prophets.' This expression refers to the entire Old Testament which is so commonly called 'Moses and the prophets.' It is here that Paul's persuading of the Jews concerning Jesus comes in. He attempted to move them to accept what Moses and the prophets had foretold and what had been fulfilled so completely in Jesus, in his sacrificial death, in his glorious resurrection, and in his eternal exaltation. The appeal was most effective in the case of Jews who lived in their glorious Scriptures" (*The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961 (1934)], 1123).

<sup>23</sup>Matthew Henry: *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Co., n. d.), 5:128.

<sup>24</sup>David Dickson, *Matthew* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1981 [1647]), 185. Spurgeon writes, "The Gospel is 'the word of the kingdom.' it has royal authority in it; it proclaims and reveals King Jesus, and it leads men to obedience to his sway" (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1987], 170).

<sup>25</sup>William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 57.

<sup>26</sup>The interpretation which says that the kingdom is broader than the church is common among commentators. Alfred

things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness” (Mt. 13:41).

When this parable is considered with the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven (which are placed between this parable [Mt. 13:24-30] and its interpretation [Mt. 13:37-43]), it is evident that the kingdom refers to the whole sphere of Christ’s rule not merely the church. Indeed, Satan does plant his hypocrites in the church. However, the battle between “the Son of Man” and “the devil” encompass the whole field—planet earth. Satan knows that the best plan for impeding the progressive expression of Christ’s dominion throughout all nations and institutional spheres in the world is the replacement of militant, biblical, life-changing Christianity with a demonic imitation. Some examples of the success of the enemy’s tactics in history are: (1) Arianism’s penetration of the church and state (AD 325-361 ff.). (2) The rank papalism of the medieval era. (3) The spread of arminianism and modernism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During the last century, Satan’s tares have not only captured many pulpits and teaching posts in professing Christian institutions, they have captured virtually all of the robes in society.

Although there are some serious setbacks for Christ’s church in history, Jesus says in this parable that He will return to a wheat field, not a tare field. Our Lord creates a field of wheat throughout the world. In Christ’s kingdom (the whole world) it is the tares that are the intruders. At the end of history the tares will be gathered up and burned in the fire which cannot be quenched.

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Plummer writes, “The field is the world (38), not the Church, which gives too narrow a meaning to the parable...” (*An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Baker: 1982 (1915)], 193. Herman Ridderbos writes, “When we were discussing these parables in a previous context, we already came across the notion that in the parable of the tares and in that of the fishing net the issue was the mingling of the wicked and the good *in the church*. On the explanation of this part of Jesus’ teaching given there, this application must unhesitatingly be rejected. This is a matter of fact, also appears from the explicit pronouncement that the field in which the wicked and the good are growing up together is *the world* (and therefore not the church, Matt. 13:38)” (*The Coming of the Kingdom*, p. 345). R. C. H. Lenski writes, “Of supreme importance is the statement that the field is *o kosmos*, ‘the world,’ and, therefore, not ‘the church’.... ‘Out of the kingdom’ refers to the kingdom as it now exists in the world where it is like gold mixed with dross” (*The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 536, 539). William Hendriksen writes, “The church is the body of professing believers. It consists of people. On the other, as has already been shown (see on 13:33), the kingdom, in its concrete manifestations, refers to that entire complex of people and spheres in which Christ’s rule is recognized. In view of this distinction it can be said that the reference in the parable is to the kingdom rather than the church” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, 573). “Not only the minds and hearts of men, without any distinction of race or nationality, must be reached, but every sphere of life must be won for him who is King of kings and Lord of lords...From the statement, ‘The field is the world’ nothing should be subtracted” (*Ibid.*, 571). Charles Spurgeon writes, “*The Field is the world*, including the church; but the field is not the church exclusively: for ‘*the good seed*,’ or ‘*the children of the kingdom*,’ is much the same as the church; and the evil seed are persons who mingle with the people of God, and live together with them in necessary association in the great field of the world. Church fellowship is not particularly aimed at, though it is encompassed by the terms used.... This will be a purging [vs. 41] not of the church, but of *the kingdom*, which at that time will include the whole field of the world” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, 178-179). Simon Kistemaker writes, “It is interesting to note that field, the world, belongs to the farmer—to Jesus. On that field grow wheat and weeds. It does not matter where man lives on the earth. Wherever he lives he finds himself on property which belongs to Jesus” (*The Parables of Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 40-41). James Morison writes, “VER. 38. And the field is the world: That is,—The kingdom of heaven is located *on earth*, so far as the initial stage of its development is concerned. The whole world is Christ’s field. It belongs to Him; and He holds it as His possession, that he may use it for the establishment of His heavenly kingdom. The expression was, in olden times, much tossed about in the Donatist controversy; the Donatists having the best of the argument, though the worst of the treatment. They insisted that the Saviour did *not* mean that *the field is the church*. Augustine insisted that He did (*Ad Donatistos Post Collationem*). Even Luther and Calvin, along with the troops of predecessors and successors, think that the Lord here “calls *the church* His field,” strangely overlooking the fact that it is *the good seed* that is *the church*. Melancthon made the same mistake. Both he and Luther were amazed when the Anabaptists, like the Donatists, contended that “the world” was not “the church.” (*A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* [Minneapolis, MN: Klock and Klock, 1981 (1884)], 236-237.

By examining the multiple meanings of the kingdom of God, (1) The visible church [Mt. 16:18-19]; (2) Eternal life or salvation [Jn. 3:3; 5:20; 7:21]; (3) A Future salvation, the consummate kingdom [1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5] or heaven itself [2 Tim. 4:18]; (4) Kingdom privileges (Mt. 21:43); (5) The reign of Christ within the hearts of believers [Lu. 17:21], the reign of the Holy Spirit [Rom. 14:17]; (6) Jesus' message—the gospel [Lk. 4:43; 9:2; 16:16; Ac. 20:25; Mt. 9:35; 13:10]; (7) The realm of Jesus' reign—the whole world [Mt. 13:24-30, 37-43], we can avoid some rather common misconceptions regarding the kingdom. The two most common misconceptions among Reformed believers are: (a) The kingdom of God must always be restricted to the church or the elect (e.g., Ronald Hanks writes, “Any attempt to make the kingdom something broader than or other than the church is wrong. Reformed theology and Scripture make them coextensive.”<sup>27</sup>); or, (b) The kingdom of God has little or nothing to do with the church. The kingdom is only Christ's reign over all. The church is viewed as merely one means to achieve the end—God's reign over every sphere of life.

Why is there such confusion regarding Christ's kingdom? One reason is that while the mediator's authority is obviously broader than the church and encompasses all things, the focus of our Lord's attention is on His people. “And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:22). Jesus governs the universe and He is the head of the church. He uses His mediatorial authority to save His people; and He rules for the best interests of the church.

## II. Two Unbiblical Extremes Considered and Refuted

Given the great emphasis of the New Testament on the kingdom as salvation and the visible church, it is understandable that many Christians want to restrict the meaning to this one area. Also, given the all-encompassing nature of Christ's rule and the modern de-emphasis on the importance of the institutional church, one can see why the comprehensive nature of the kingdom has been emphasized at the expense of the local and institutional church. Both of these views, however, need to be rejected.

### A. “*The Kingdom Is Only the Church*” Retreatists

Those who insist that the kingdom is only the church tend to be retreatists. (We are speaking generally here for there are always believers who function inconsistently with areas of their own theological paradigm). They often hold to a defeatist eschatology (e.g., the negative amillennialism of the Protestant Reformed Church) which teaches that there can be no visible kingdom victory over nations and cultures. Thus the visible church is viewed as a tiny remnant always on the defensive. The first century picture of a persecuted suffering church is made the functioning paradigm of all church history. Local Christian churches are viewed as tiny ghettos of believers which should not get involved in politics or broader cultural areas. Often such churches are very inward looking and thus focus their attention on church programs and activities while virtually ignoring the cultural mandate. People who operate under this retreatist paradigm often teach that attempting to apply God's law to society to build a Christian civilization is a total waste of time or, even worse, is unbiblical and evil.

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<sup>27</sup>Ronald Hanks, “Kingdom and Church in ‘Christian’ Reconstruction” in *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* (Grandville, MI Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches, 1998), 32:1, 31.

Those who seek to develop a distinctly Christian culture functioning under biblical law are often falsely labeled Judaizers or ecclesiocrats. It is argued that since the kingdom is purely spiritual and heavenly, churches violate their mission and even become corrupt if they attempt to apply God's law-word outside of the church or covenant home. Such a defeatist view is in a sense an unconditional surrender to the enemies of Christ. It is certainly not the view of our reformed postmillennial forefathers. Gentry writes,

One particular theme—the Gospel Victory Theme—is quite dominant in the entire prophetic Scriptures; its omission in much modern eschatology is to be lamented. Its replacement with a defeatist scheme for Christian activity has paralyzed the Christian cultural enterprise, emptied the Christian worldview of practical significance, and given the Christian a sinful comfort in lethargy. It has left the earth (which 'is the Lord's,' Psalm 24:1) to a conquered foe and the enemy of our Lord and Savior. This paralysis is all the more lamentable in that it has caused forfeiture of great gains made by the tireless and costly labors of our Christian forefathers, particularly from the Reformation era through the early 1900s.<sup>28</sup>

In order to refute amillennial retreatism which limits the kingdom to the church and premillennial retreatism which postpones visible societal effects of the kingdom until the second coming we need to consider a number of areas relating to the Messiah's reign.

(1) Note that Jesus Christ's authority is comprehensive. "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth'" (Mt. 28:18). The Greek word *exousia* (translated authority) "denotes active power; the full ability to do as one wills."<sup>29</sup> This means that Christ's will will be carried out. The scope of Jesus' authority is indicated by the phrase "in heaven and on earth." Our Lord has been given universal cosmic dominion not just over the physical universe and everything in it, but also everything spiritual: the spirits of those who have died and all the heavenly hosts (angels and demons). "Jesus Christ...has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him" (1 Pet. 3:21-22). He is the "head of every man" (1 Cor. 11:3) and the "head of all principality and power" (Col. 2:10). "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father" (Mt. 11:27). "Jesus Christ He is Lord of all" (Ac. 10:36). "And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church" (Eph. 1:22). "For 'He has put all things under His feet'" (1 Cor. 15:27). "You have put all things in subjection under his feet" (Heb. 2:8; cf. Ps. 8:6-8).

It is very obvious that Scripture does not limit the Messiah's power to the members of the church. There is an authority even over all His enemies and all nations. "'Sit at My right hand, til I make Your enemies Your footstool.' The Lord shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of your enemies" (Ps. 110:1-2)! "How many enemies soever shall oppose the kingdom of Christ, and how powerful soever they shall be, yet Christ shall dear rule, enjoy his kingdom, maintain his subjects, and go on in his conquests."<sup>30</sup> "Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession....Now therefore, be wise, O kings; be instructed, you judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way" (Ps. 8, 10-12). It is vain and utterly foolish for

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<sup>28</sup>Greg L. Bansen and Kenneth L. Gentry, *House Divided: The Break-Up of Dispensational Theology* (Tyler, TX: The Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), 140.

<sup>29</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961 [1943]), 1171.

<sup>30</sup>David Dickson, *A Commentary on the Psalms* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1959 [1653]), 297.

kings to oppose Christ's government. Therefore, they would be wise to submit themselves to His authority and rule in accordance with His law for the alternative is destruction. "Among the human family, not one is exempted from the government of Messiah; none so high as to be beyond his reach, none so low as to be beneath his notice. He has power over all flesh."<sup>31</sup>

The mediator is called the "King of nations" (Jer. 10:7), the "ruler over the kings of the earth" (Rev. 1:5), "Lord of lords and King of kings" (Rev. 17:14; 19:16). The term "nations" obviously refers to organized civil bodies. Jesus is the King over kings. They are under His authority and are within the bounds of His rule (the kingdom). As such they are responsible to live and rule according to His precepts. This teaching is found throughout the prophets. M'Crie writes,

God addresses the nations in a collective capacity, reproves them for their idolatry, and calls them to his worship (Isa. 34:1; 41:1, 21-29). He proposes Christ, as his anointed servant, to them (chap. 42:1); declares that he has given the nations for his inheritance, and that he shall inherit them all (Ps. 2:8; 82:8; Isa. 53:15; 55:5). Christ addresses himself, not only to individuals, but to whole islands (Isa. 44:1), nations join themselves to him (Isa. 2:2; Micah 4:1, 2; Zech 2:11; 8:20-22), bless themselves to him and glory in him (Jer. 4:2); all nations and dominions serve him (Dan. 7:14, 27). They consecrate all things in them, and employ them in his service (Isa. 60:1-12; Zech. 14:20, 21); he owns these nations as his, and blesses them, while he breaks in pieces and wastes others (Ps. 33:12; 145:15; Isa. 19:25; Ps. 2:9, 12; Isa. 60:12).<sup>32</sup>

The biblical evidence that Christ is presently reigning over the nations is so clear and overwhelming, that it is astonishing that this vital doctrine is ignored by so many in our day.

(2) The Messiah reveals His royal majesty, power and law in history and the second coming by both salvation and judgment. Jesus' re-assertion of God's rights on earth to men, stands upon a judicial foundation. Men are subdued either by union with Christ in His life, death and resurrection (i.e., salvation in its fullest sense) or they are subdued by God's wrath and judgment. Ridderbos writes, "It explains why from the outset the announcement of the fulness of time had a twofold content both with Jesus and with John the Baptist, namely that of redemption and that of judgment...The kingdom means redemption, because God maintains his royal justice toward those who put their trust in him as his people. And it means judgment because God maintains his royal will in opposition to all who resist his will."<sup>33</sup> The Westminster Shorter Catechism concurs: "Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies" (Answer to Question 26).

While it is true that the mediator conquers the nations by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit and the sword of the Spirit (the Bible), there are also historical judgments that bring down the enemies of Christ. Two clear examples would be the nation of Israel (A.D. 70) and the Roman Empire (A.D. 476). The church does not resort to swords, bullets or bombs, but Jesus Himself intervenes in history on behalf of the church punishing kings and nations, destroying kingdoms, raising up new civil governments and so forth, all for the sake of His church. The historical judgments of the mediator are all precursors that point to the final worldwide universal judgment at the end of human history. The Bible emphasizes that every knee will bow and every tongue will

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<sup>31</sup>William Symington, *Messiah the Prince*, 64.

<sup>32</sup>Thomas M'Crie, *Statement of the Difference Between the Profession of the Reformed Church of Scotland, as Adopted by Seceders, and the Profession Contained in the New Testimony and Other Acts, Lately Adopted by the General Associate Synod, etc.* (Edinburg: C. F. Lyon, 1871), 137-138.

<sup>33</sup>Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 20.

confess that Jesus is Lord (Phil. 2:10). There are those who bow in loving humble submission to their Lord and Savior (Rev. 4:10-11), and those who bow in terror as vanquished foes, enemies of Messiah the Prince (Rev. 1:5). John the Baptist emphasized both aspects of Jesus' kingship in his preaching. The coming Messiah will baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Mt. 3:11). "In these two metaphors we are confronted with a two-fold meaning of the coming of the kingdom: those that are to be saved will be given an overpowering measure of the Spirit's operation, and those that will be lost will be abandoned to the fire, i.e., the perdition (cf. also Matt. 3:10, 12)."<sup>34</sup>

The two-fold aspect of Christ's kingdom is also taught in passages such as Psalm 2 where Jehovah laughs at rulers and nations that challenge the authority of the mediator. In this Psalm the resurrected Son (vs. 7) is given (definitively) the "nations" and "the ends of the earth" as His "possession." On the basis of the Son's mediatorial authority "kings" and "judges" are instructed to "serve the LORD [Jesus Christ] with fear." If they do not they will receive judgment in history (vs. 12) and eternal damnation in the hereafter (Rev. 20:13-15). In Psalm 45 the Messiah girds his sword upon His thigh and rides prosperously because of truth, humility and righteousness (vs. 3-4). In Psalm 110 the kingship of Christ involves the progressive victory of the mediator over His enemies in history until a total victory is achieved. Note that Jesus' rule involves a direct physical violence against His enemies. "The Lord is at Your right hand; He shall execute kings in the day of His wrath. He shall judge among the nations, He shall fill the places with dead bodies, He shall execute the heads of many countries. He shall drink of the brook by the wayside; therefore He shall lift up the head" (vs. 5-7). The enthronement of the priest-king is the prelude to world conquest. Progressive judgments and victories are part of that conquest. The mediator is poetically seen as stopping to refresh Himself before completing the rout of His enemies. In Revelation the mediator conquers the nations by the sharp sword that goes out of His mouth. This is clearly an apocalyptic image of the preaching of the gospel and the whole counsel of God. There is also a reference to judgment. "And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God" (Rev. 19:15). In Revelation, only the Lamb that was slain and has prevailed has the authority to open the seal of judgment and thus to blow the trumpets and pour out the seven vials in which the enemies of the mediator and His church are judged. That the mediator is exhibited as waging war with kings and men who oppose His rule should not surprise us "For the Father...has committed all judgment to the Son" (Jn. 5:22).

(3) The kingdom cannot be limited to the church for the mediator's authority extends to all earthly institutions and all covenantal spheres whether domestic, civil or ecclesiastical. Jesus commanded the apostles and their successors to disciple "all the nations" (Mt. 28:19). The significance of our Lord's choice of the word nations (*ethnos*) rather than individuals is that the goal of the Great Commission is not just that a few individuals here and there are to be disciples, but rather that eventually whole nations are to be brought under the subjection of Christ. The church's task is not completed until institutions, cultures and civil governments submit to the King over kings. Kings are required "to kiss the Son" (Ps. 2:12). Civil magistrates are *directly* under the authority of Christ. As ministers of God (Rom. 13:4) they are required to rule in accordance with Scripture. The Great Commission (in accordance with the Psalms and Prophets) looks to a time when nations will establish national covenants with Christ. There will be national professions and the establishment of Christianity in nation after nation.

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<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 29-30.

There is no neutrality when men form themselves into societies or institutions. Such groups of people can corporately work to do good or evil. All such societies are obligated to conduct themselves in accordance with God's law. They must seek to glorify Christ as king in all their endeavors. As men and institutions (i.e., marriage, business, civil governments, etc.) look to Jesus and "bring into captivity every thought to the obedience to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5) by learning and submitting to the "all things" that our Lord commanded (Mt. 28:18f), they develop a Christian culture. "If we are going to 'witness' to the people of the world how they are to behave, should we not behave according to our witness and strive to get *them* to live according to our witness, by the grace of God? Should not we do all things—whether eating or drinking or whatever we do in word or deed—to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17)? Especially since we will give account of every word and deed before Christ (2 Cor. 10:5; Matt. 12:36; Rom. 14:12)? In other word, should not redemption affect *all of life*? May not redemption involve the turning from sin in all of life, even to the point of issuing forth in a distinctive sociopolitical culture, since Israel's 'redemption' did such?"<sup>35</sup>

Although the mediator's kingdom is spiritual and our citizenship is in heaven, we must live as believers here upon earth. Yes, we are to pray, read our Bibles, go to church, partake of the ordinances and work diligently on personal piety. Christians, however, do not live in monasteries. Our personal sanctification is to extend to everything we do. Every area of our lives is to be brought under the dominion of Christ. "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17). Therefore Jesus instructed His disciples, saying, "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men" (Mt. 5:13). Believers are to be as salt to society. That is, by their words and deeds they are to preserve society from moral and social decay. This passage assumes that Christians have an important role to play in the transformation of culture. If professing Christians are not having an impact on the corruption of mankind because of worldliness, heresy, laziness or a flight from responsibility, then our Lord says that they are worthless, impure and unsalty. Phony, hypocritical professors of religion are the most useless mortals. As believers apply Scripture to every area of life, they influence their families, friends, acquaintances and even strangers. As more and more people believe in Christ and apply God's word to their sphere of influence, society is progressively leavened. Our Lord certainly does not sanction the escapist, defeatist, mentality so common among evangelicals today. Christianity is radical. Fervent believers can and will (by the power and grace of Christ's Spirit) change the whole world. Christians are "the light of the world" (Mt. 5:14). Their love and good works must exhibit the love of Christ to all men.

Evangelicals have largely neglected this important area of Christ's rule for a number of reasons. First, many have bought into the idea that there are areas of life that are "neutral;" that can be conducted according to common neutral principles or according to "natural law." They would argue that individuals and families must submit to Christ but that civil governments, schools, the arts, etc., function just fine without an explicit commitment to Christ. In fact many evangelicals argue that an explicitly Christian state would be wrong. As one dispensational theologian has said, "We want a moral America not a Christian America." The idea that there are areas of life that are neutral is wrong and dangerous. The neutrality myth must be rejected for the following reasons. (a) The idea of neutrality is based not on Scripture, which teaches that God has created all things and is the source of all meaning and ethics, but on the Greek concept of a realm of ideals that exist

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<sup>35</sup>Greg L. Bahnsen and Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *House Divided: The Break-Up of Dispensational Theology*, 200.

independently of God to which *both* God and man can and must look to for ethics. (b) Neutrality is impossible, for everything is defined and conditioned in accordance with a particular world and life view. In other words, one's religious and philosophical presuppositions determine his view of factuality and ethics. All laws are ultimately based on a faith commitment to a particular philosophical system. The Christian looks to Jesus the Lord as the source for all ethics. Every thought is made captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5). Unbelievers will base their laws on man-made idols. This can include every false belief from rank atheism and polytheism to all modern forms of secular humanism. With secular humanism man self-consciously rejects the transcendent in favor of positivistic-relativistic ethics that flows directly from the autonomous will of humanity. "Law is in every culture *religious in origin*. Because law governs man and society, because it establishes and declares the meaning of justice and righteousness, law is inescapably religious, in that it establishes in practical fashion the ultimate concerns of a culture.... Since the foundations of law are inescapably religious, no society exists without a religious foundation or without a law-system which codifies the morality of its religion."<sup>36</sup> (c) Neutrality is immoral because it is founded upon the idea that God has not revealed Himself to mankind in a manner that demands repentance, belief and obedience and upon the idea that there are areas of life that are outside of Christ's direct rule and authority. The mediator's authority is comprehensive. It extends not merely to the Christian, church or covenant family but also to the state, courtroom, and classroom.

If believers are not faithful to the Great Commission and do not seek to establish Christian institutions founded upon the mediator's law-word, then secular humanists (i.e., socialists, environmentalists, homosexuals, pornographers, abortionists, statist, nihilists, etc.) will be happy to impose a satanic law order upon Christians. This new law order will eventually lead to the persecution of believers. Rushdoony writes, "There can be no tolerance in a law system for another religion. Tolerance is a device used to introduce a new law system as a prelude to a new intolerance. Legal positivism, a humanistic faith, has been savage in its hostility to the biblical law system and has claimed to be an "open" system.... Every law system must maintain its existence by hostility to every other law system and to alien religious foundations, or else it commits suicide."<sup>37</sup> When professing Christians insist that the civil government, the courts and the schools remain secular (or, in their mind neutral) they are surrendering and are handing their children over to anti-Christ persecutors. As our society (in the last forty years) has become more and more epistemologically self-aware and consistent with its own anti-Christian world view, many leaders in academia, the media and the entertainment industry have spoken openly of their intolerance and hatred of biblical Christianity. There has been a shift in the society from "All religions are good and equal" to "Bible-believing Christianity is evil and must not be tolerated." Laws that accept and promote infanticide (i.e., abortion), sodomite rights (e.g., "gay marriage"), sexual deviancy and state theft prove that "society now draws its vitality and power from humanism not Christian theism."<sup>38</sup>

Second, there has been a rejection of biblical law with respect to the civil magistrate by most professing Christians. Believers are told to look to the Bible for personal and ecclesiastical ethics but that God's word has little or nothing to say regarding the state. Biblical civil government (we are told) must either await Jesus' personal presence when He rules on earth as supreme dictator (premillennialism) or will never occur in history (amillennialism). This unscriptural understanding of biblical law is directly related to a false understanding of Christ's kingdom. If the kingdom is only

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<sup>36</sup>Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977 [73]), 4-5.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

the church then the moral case laws of the Bible that direct civil governments in their task of civil justice are unnecessary. Also, if there will never be a Christianization of the state until the second coming, all attempts at a biblical reformation of the state are a waste of precious time. Those who restrict Jesus' authority by limiting it to the church or by placing it in the distant future have no need for biblical blue prints by which to run a Christian society. Therefore, they implicitly are presenting a king with a very limited authority. They of course would argue that this limitation (i.e., the failure of the gospel to create a Christian civilization) is self-imposed. However, they still do teach that the king has a very limited kingdom and that the whole world (at least regarding civil matters) is not under the laws of the king. Sadly, societal antinomianism and eschatological defeatism (if widely held) becomes self-fulfilling, because professing Christians who hold to such views (when theologically consistent) do not make any effort to implement a Christian social order. We have already noted that the limitation of the mediator's kingdom is scripturally unwarranted; that Christ has "all authority in heaven *and on earth*" (Mt. 28:18); that He commands the discipling of all nations (This involves the development of a Christian civilization, a Christocentric culture).

Third (as noted above), eschatological systems which teach that the discipling of the nations in history will be a massive failure have greatly limited the comprehensiveness of redemption (i.e., the extent numerically, culturally, and sociologically). Consequently, they must redefine the authority and power of the mediator's reign. Theological foci are interrelated. Therefore, eschatology should not be treated as an unimportant after thought in dogmatics. A king who cannot or does not exercise power or conquer is a king without comprehensive authority. Such an eschatological system inevitably leads to a reduction of the kingdom (e.g., save souls not cultures).

(4) The mediator's reign refers not merely to the work of the institutional church (i.e., the work of elders and deacons in public worship, counseling, discipline, missions, etc.), but to the whole work of every believer in the world.

During the middle ages the Roman Catholic Church defined God's kingdom according to their understanding of the visible church. For Papists the visible church meant the church hierarchy (e.g., popes, cardinals, bishops, priests, monks, nuns, etc.). Therefore, if a person wanted to serve the kingdom he or she would render some type of service to the church rulers. This would involve building massive cathedrals, beautiful monasteries, fighting crusades, purchasing and donating relics and so on.

Biblical Protestantism set aside the unbiblical papal view of the Kingdom by setting forth the scriptural doctrine that every believer is a priest, that every Christian has direct access to God through Jesus Christ. One implication of this doctrine was that every Christian calling in the world is important. No longer was there a sacerdotal separation of the clergy and the laity. God regarded the calling of every believer as important in His kingdom. Further, no longer was the church defined in terms of a church hierarchy (the institutional church) but as all believers and their seed (e.g., Westminster Confession of Faith 25:2).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>R. J. Rushdoony notes the consequences of holding to a Romanist understanding of the church. He writes, "The question is this: is the institutional church to be identified with the visible church? The Roman Catholic Church holds that the visible and invisible church are very closely linked and that the visible church is the institutional church. In other words, the Roman Catholic Church is the Kingdom of God on earth. The immediate implications of this for every-day life are far-reaching. The world is divided into two realms, first, the realm of grace, which is the Kingdom of God or the church, and, second, the realm of nature, which is the rest of the world. As a consequence, the only way in which the home, the school, and the government can be linked with God is through the institutional church, in that they possess no direct relationship with Christ and hence no direct relationship with God. Their relationship being mediated and subordinated to the institutional church, it becomes necessary for the state, school and home to be under the authority of

Those who define the kingdom in terms of the institutional church are forced by virtue of an unbiblical starting point (i.e., the kingdom is only the institutional church) to reject any concept of kingdom rule over the state. They caricature the broad definition of the kingdom as the church gaining dominion over society (ecclesiocracy). Note Hanks's false representation of theonomic postmillennialism: "Nevertheless, that kingdom is in the world, not for the purpose of improving the world, or for the purpose of being *the world under the dominion of the church*."<sup>40</sup> Biblical theonomists have always argued that the church, family and state are directly under Christ's authority. Presbyterians have argued vehemently that the church is not under the authority of the state (e.g., see *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 23) and the state is not under the authority of the church (ecclesiocracy). Both must submit to the mediator's direct rule in their own respective spheres.

When Protestants adopt a medieval Roman Catholic definition of the kingdom they lose their outward vision and focus all their attention on the institutional church. Hanks writes, "All their [Christians'] life centers in and focuses on the church, *just as does God's purpose and work*."<sup>41</sup> Evangelical churches that have this mind set spend most of their time and money on church programs: youth groups, women's and men's activities, basketball courts, health clubs, tennis courts, elaborate stage presentations, etc. The result is weakened families and a state left to the devil. Because everything is viewed in terms of the institutional church, covenant headship is replaced by youth group leaders; and, the church's prophetic role to the state and society as salt and light (Mt. 5:13-14) is replaced with church entertainment and prophecy conferences. Gary North warns us of the consequences of this false understanding of the kingdom. He writes,

So pietists have sharply separated the kingdom of God (narrowly defined) from the world. Separating the institutional church from the world is necessary, but *separating God's kingdom from this world leads to the surrender of the world to Satan's kingdom*. Thus is it never a question of "earthly kingdom vs. no earthly kingdom;" it is always a question of *whose* earthly kingdom, God's or Satan's? To deny that God's kingdom extends to the earth in history—the here and now—is necessary to assert that Satan's kingdom is legitimate, at least until Jesus comes again. But Satan's kingdom is not legitimate, and Christians should do whatever they can to roll it back. *Rolling back Satan's earthly kingdom means rolling forward Christ's earthly kingdom*.<sup>42</sup>

Negative amillennialists (e.g., the Protestant Reformed Church) must strictly limit the mediator's kingdom to the church because they refuse to accept the fact that Jesus' redemptive work has any residual effect upon unbelievers and society. One does not have to believe that Christ died

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the church in every avenue of life, and, as members of an inferior realm, the realm of nature, to be under constant suspicion and guard. The realm of nature is seen as in constant tension with the realm of grace and only able to serve God as it dominated by the authority of grace, the church. Now as Dooyeweerd, Spier, Van Til, Vollenhoven and others have pointed out, this fundamental dichotomy between grace and nature is altogether unbiblical and wrong. The dichotomy is not between grace and nature but between grace and sin so that when any realm of nature enters in to the state of grace it becomes part thereby of the visible church. To define the kingdom of God or the visible church in terms of the institutional church is to take the road to Rome, to drift toward the subordination of every avenue of life to the church. Many Protestants indeed share in this position and view every avenue of life with suspicion apart from the ecclesiastical domination." (*Institutional Schizophrenia: Culture, Crisis and Education*, [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961], 38-39).

<sup>40</sup>Ronald Hanks, "Kingdom and Church in 'Christian' Reconstruction," 60-61.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid*, 61.

<sup>42</sup>Gary North and Gary DeMar, *Christian Reconstruction: What It Is, What It Isn't*, 29.

for all men to believe that when a society adopts a Christian law order in submission to the king that the *whole* culture benefits. Protestant Reformed theologians must restrict the kingdom to the church, because they reject the idea that God can give *any* undeserved temporary benefits to unbelievers as a result of Jesus' atonement. The idea is that if unbelievers benefit in any way from our Lord's death then one is guilty of teaching a universal atonement. This assertion is simply untrue. A society in which Christians predominate; which covenants with the King and adopts biblical law will be an orderly, prosperous, blessed, and safe society. All citizens will benefit from low crime rates, dependable justice and economic prosperity. This means that people who reject Jesus will receive *temporary* benefits from the rule of the King, from His rule of justice. Does this beneficial rule forgive their sins? No. Does this lessen their punishment in hell? No. It will increase it, for the more biblical knowledge one has the more one is responsible to repent (cf. Lk. 12:47-48).

Does the fact that unbelievers only receive temporary benefits under a Christian law order mean that believers should not seek to implement the laws of the King over society? No. Such a view must be rejected for the following reasons. (a) Believers are commanded to disciple nations not merely individuals (Mt. 28:18ff.). (b) When nations adopt a Christian law system and covenant with Christ, the mediator is glorified and the church (the kingdom in the narrow sense) greatly benefits. Indeed God has promised a time when kings will serve Christ and aid His church. Isaiah prophesied, "Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers; they shall bow down to you with their faces to the earth, and lick up the dust of your feet" (49:23). M'Crie writes,

These promises [Is. 49:23, 60:10, 12, 16] secure unto the church the public countenance of kings and kingdoms as such. *Kings shall be her nursing-fathers; nations and kingdoms shall serve her.* The authority and means competent unto them as such shall be employed on the side of the church, and for the advancement of the true religion; whereas they had formerly been employed against her, and for the support of a false religion. To limit the sense of the words to that common protection which is given to all subjects, and to any society, is to explain away the promises of God...It is equally unreasonable to confine the meaning to the private or personal conduct of rulers, and of their subjects. This would never suggest itself to any who, in reading the passage, had not formed the notion that the church cannot be benefitted by civil power. It offers violence to the plain meaning of the words. It does not accord with the context, which speaks of the public state of the church, and those means which tend to advance its interests in this view.<sup>43</sup>

(c) The Bible teaches that all nations will learn Christ's law from the church. This teaching is incompatible with the amillennial ghetto mentality. "Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; And all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Is. 2:2-3; cf. Mal. 1:11. 4.) The idea that God cannot give temporary undeserved benefits to unbelievers is unscriptural. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Mt. 5:44-45). "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also

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<sup>43</sup>Thomas M'Crie, 137-138.

is merciful” (Lk. 6:35-36). The psalmist writes, “The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy. The LORD is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works” (Ps. 145:8-9). Do these passages teach that God is favorable to or loves the unregenerate? No. They certainly do not. To say that God has a favorable view or attitude toward the non-elect would contradict a number of clear biblical passages (e.g., Jn. 3:36; Ps. 5:4-6; Rom. 9:13).

Even though God hates the non-elect, He is gracious and kind to them and gives them undeserved temporary gifts. Believers are to imitate God by having a biblical attitude of hatred toward God’s enemies (Ps. 139:21-22) while treating them with kindness, mercy and love (Mt. 5:43-48; Lk. 10:33-37). This means that believers are to treat the heathen *lawfully* (Jas. 2:8; Mt. 22:39-40). By doing so they fulfilled the royal law of love (Rom. 13:8; Gal. 5:14) and heap coals of fire upon their heads (Pr. 25:21-22). When Christians apply God’s law to society by teaching God’s word and loving their neighbor, the heathen simultaneously receive undeserved benefits in this life and greater damnation in the life to come. The law serves as an instrument of temporary grace as well as an instrument of condemnation. As Christians obey biblical law and apply it to every sphere of life, it simultaneously leads to the Christian reconstruction of society (and undeserved benefits for all) and greater condemnation for the wicked. The wicked receive absolutely no *direct* benefits from Jesus’ death (special grace), however, they do receive indirect temporary benefits (common graceBbiblically defined). “The law of God serves as a tool of final *destruction* against the lost, yet it also serves as a tool of active *reconstruction* for the Christian.”<sup>44</sup> As more and more people are converted to Christ and are given the power to more and more obey God’s law, the heathen receive more and more temporary benefits. “God’s people are to become conduits of God’s gifts to the unregenerate.”<sup>45</sup>

Protestant Reformed theologians seem to have taken the position that: (a) any idea of the law and gospel having a broad positive effect on culture and society is a denial of special grace and promotion of the social gospel (i.e., modernism); (b) Since there can be no positive effect of the law and gospel on culture and society, in general Christians must retreat from the public square; (c) When it comes to nations and cultures in history the gospel will be a massive failure.

(5) The Bible teaches that when nations covenant with Christ, adopt a Christian law order and are faithful to that law system, they become godly examples to other nations. A national commitment to Christ and His law serves as a great evangelistic tool to other countries. “Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him” (Dt. 4:5-8)? Contemporary Christians have long forgotten the covenantal nature of nations, that nations in a certain sense are treated in Scripture as a “moral person” or a “covenantal body.” Thus Solomon could say “Righteousness exalts a nation” (Pr. 14:34). David writes, “Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD” (Ps. 33:12). “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forgot God” (Ps. 9:17). When whole nations turn to Christ they will receive great blessings from God. God can and will use whole nations “who kiss the Son” as a testimony, a city on a hill, to other nations. That is one reason why the early medieval missionaries would often go first to the royalty with the

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<sup>44</sup>Gary North, *Dominion and Common Grace: The Biblical Basis of Progress* (Tyler, TX: The Institute for Christian Economics, 1987), 29-30.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 28.

gospel.

(6) The kingdom cannot be restricted to the church for Christ's law has a civil function in suppressing wicked men. Paul says that the law plays an important role in suppressing (holding back or restraining) the evil acts of men. "But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:8-10). The apostle says that the law (as a force for restraining evil in society) is not needed for people who are regenerated; who are under the control of the Holy Spirit and therefore who are already living a life of self-restraint. No. It is needed to hold back the wicked, unregenerate, rebellious vermin of society. Calvin writes,

The law restrains malefactors and those who are not yet unbelievers. The law is protection of the community from unjust man. . . . The second function of the law is this: at least by fear of punishment to restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by hearing the dire threats in the law. But they are restrained, not because their inner mind is stirred or affected, but because, being bridled, so to speak, they keep their hands from outward activity, and hold inside the depravity that otherwise they would wantonly have indulged. Consequently, they are neither better nor more righteous before God.<sup>46</sup>

We have already noted that all civil rulers are explicitly commanded in Scripture to submit to the mediatorial throne. This recognition of the king on the part of political leaders must involve the adoption of biblical law (a Christian law order). One obviously cannot be a faithful servant of Christ while holding to a humanistic law order. To be obedient to the mediatorial king, rulers must "judge righteously" (Dt. 1:16; "just judgment," Dt. 16:18); "ruling in the fear of God" (23:3; Ps. 2:10-11). They must *not* be "a terror to good works but to evil" (Rom. 13:3). Any civil ruler who does not obey Christ by adopting His law is guilty of oppressing the citizens of his nation and stands in rebellion against Jesus, the king of nations. Symington writes,

Jesus, as king of nations, exacts obedience to his commands. The moral law and all the precepts of Scripture are administered by Christ. Communities, as well as individuals, are under the divine law. Such commands, therefore, as are found in the Word of God, applicable to nations and their rulers, are to be regarded as issuing from the divine Mediator, who is invested with all possible sovereignty and power; with not merely physical control, but moral dominion. It follows that wherever we find nations commanded to serve the Lord, and civil rulers required to promote the public good—to restrain evil; to administer the laws with equity, impartiality, and benevolence; to set a good example in intelligence, morality, and religion; and to give countenance, protection and aid to the Church—we are to recognize the authority of the Redeemer.<sup>47</sup>

If Jesus has moral dominion and expects all, whether Christian or non-Christian, to submit to His law and if (as noted) a Christian order does indeed have a broad effect on society (including the unregenerate—"the lawless and insubordinate"), then one cannot limit Christ's rule, His kingdom, to

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<sup>46</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), Bk. II, Ch. VII, sec. 10, 358.

<sup>47</sup>William Symington, *Messiah the Prince*, 142-143.

the church. Premillennialists and negative amillennialists (by limiting Jesus' kingdom to the church or the future millennium) have implicitly denied the all-encompassing nature of the mediator's reign and have surrendered the world to the devil.

(7) As noted above, the Bible teaches that Christ's redemption is to have a worldwide, positive effect, just as Adam's fall has had a world-wide, negative effect. In other words Jesus' salvation has a world-wide, cosmic significance far beyond plucking a few souls from the fire. Indeed, Paul says that the small piece of land promised in the Abrahamic covenant pointed to a time in which his seed would inherit the whole world through the righteousness of faith. "For the promise [was] that he would be the heir of the world" (Rom. 4:13). Christ's redemptive work restores the dominion mandate to its original God glorifying purpose. The mediator achieved nothing less than a re-creation. "Christ's redemptive labors are designed eventually to effect the redemption of the created order of men and things. And that redemptive activity extends out into the future. There is coming a day when the accomplished result of Christ's labors will be evident in a world redeemed by Gospel forces already long operative."<sup>48</sup> Jesus is the savior of the world (cf. Jn. 1:29; 3:16-17; 1 Jn. 2:2; 2 Cor. 5:19). This point obviously does not mean that every individual in world will be saved. However, given the original intent of the dominion mandate, the grandiose covenant promises to Abraham, the topology of Israel's conquest of Canaan, the gospel victory motif of the Old Testament kingdom prophecies and the promise of Christ's ever present aid in carrying out the Great Commission, we can rest assured that the gospel will indeed leaven the whole world including nations and cultures. Because Christ's redemptive work is designed to produce a Christian civilization, not just Christian individuals, the mediatorial kingdom cannot be restricted to the visible church.

### *B. The Christian Reconstructionist Distortion of the Kingdom as Only a Christian Civilization*

Another perversion of the biblical teaching on the kingdom of God is related to a de-emphasis on the church as God's kingdom in favor of a broad definition of the kingdom as Christ's rule over the world or a Christianized civilization. Sadly, this distortion is quite common in Christian Reconstructionist circles. Note the following quotes of reconstructionist leaders.

Andrew Sandlin writes, "We equally recognize the ministry of the church outside the barriers of its institution as it presses the claims of Christ in every sphere. We believe the institutional church is one valid institution among many in the advancement of the kingdom of God, and one expression of the church among several expressions...The great contribution of the ecclesiastical paradigm of Rushdoony and Christian reconstruction is to insist that Protestants be true to their own inner principles: mainly, this denotes, the simple though staggering realization that the church in any of its expressions is not the end, but *the means to the end*, in God's purpose on earth. That end is not the church, but *the kingdom of God and of Christ*, when the *kingdom* is interpreted as God's reign on earth."<sup>49</sup>

Stephen C. Perks writes, "The battle for the rebuilding of Christian society and culture will be fought on two fronts in the next century: education and the media. These two fronts are the two fronts of the same battle field, and they are coming closer together all the time now. The battle for

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<sup>48</sup>Greg L. Bahnsen and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *House Divided*, 206.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Sandlin, "Recapturing the Vision of Christian Reconstruction," *Christianity and Society*, VI: 3, 22, 23.

society will not be won in the church; most people don't go to church any more"<sup>50</sup>

Writing in 1986, former Reconstructionist James Jordan noted the two main types of Reconstructionists. He writes, "With this in mind, it is helpful to note that Reconstructionists can be grouped in two 'camps.' One group emphasizes the importance of the local Christian day school and home schooling over the Church, and looks to education as the primary means of bringing Reconstruction to American life. The other group emphasizes the importance of the local sacramental body of the Church, and sees the Church as the nursery of the Kingdom."<sup>51</sup>

While it is important to recognize the fact that in Scripture God's kingdom can be broader than the church, it is a great mistake to restrict the meaning of Christ's kingdom to its broadest definition alone. To do so leads to a de-emphasis of the importance of the church in God's plan. Out of seven identifiable meanings of the kingdom in Scripture only one defines the kingdom as the world or the realm of Jesus' reign. All of the others are related either to the visible or invisible church, salvation, the gospel or the reign of the Holy Spirit in believers. Therefore, when we discuss the kingdom of Christ our primary emphasis should be on our Lord's realm of grace and salvation and not simply on the exalted Lord's realm of power and the residual effects of grace upon society.

The common Reconstructionist one-sided or distorted understanding of the kingdom has had a negative impact on the Christian reconstruction movement as a whole. There are a number of problems that are tangentially related to their one-sided understanding of the kingdom.

(1) The role of the church as an institution is greatly downplayed or de-emphasized in the Christianization of society and nations. The church is not merely one institution among many that expands the king of Christ. It is the primary institution or chief instrument in Christian reconstruction. This assertion is proved by the following arguments.

(a) The Great Commission is directed to an ordained ministry. Thus, the preaching and teaching ministry of the church and the administration of the sacraments are the central means of discipling the nations. The idea that the church is only one means among many ignores the pattern of kingdom growth in the book of Acts where ordained, sent-out church officers preach the gospel and plant churches throughout the empire.

One cannot find para-church organizations in the New Testament because they are modern inventions that have nothing to do with Scripture. Such organizations have no authority to preach the gospel or administer the sacraments. They are unscriptural. Men who are not a part of a presbytery, who make themselves president of some made-up foundation or organization, who then denigrate the importance of the institutional church, are not following the kingdom plan set up by Christ and His inspired apostles.

It has been this author's experience that "theonomists" who are not dedicated Presbyterians, notoriously err regarding the local church. They are deficient in their commitment to church membership, tithing, submission to ecclesiastical authority, systematic theology, confessional adherence and so forth. They tend to think that the modern Christian Reconstructionist movement is more important than the church. Further, many like to hear about the ills of society but do not want to hear about personal sanctification.

(b) The church is unique among all the earthly institutions in that it and it alone holds the

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<sup>50</sup> Stephen C. Perks, "The Implications of the Information Revolution for the Future of the Christian Church," *Christianity and Society*, VI:4, 27.

<sup>51</sup> James Jordan, "Christian Reconstruction: A Definition," *Journey*, November-December, 1986, 9.

keys of the kingdom. Ordained church officers are responsible to preach, teach and administer the sacraments. Also, teaching and ruling elders are to administer discipline. The institutional sphere of the civil magistrate and the family do not hold the keys and must sit under the teaching and discipline of the church. This position has nothing to do with Romanism or high church Episcopalianism (e.g., the Tyler theonomists) because the church's authority is not intrinsic or arbitrary but ministerial. The church can only require what Scripture requires and can only discipline when violations of the Bible occur.

(c) The church is a depository and witness of the truth in the world. The church is described by Paul as "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). It is to hold fast the form of sound words received from Christ and the inspired apostles (2 Tim. 1:13) and "strive together for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27). The apostle is not teaching that the church invents or determines the truth (e.g., Romanism), but rather that the church has a responsibility to believe, teach, uphold, obey and guard what God has revealed (the whole Bible; the whole truth of Christianity [i.e., Reformed theology]).

This responsibility not only means that the church has a responsibility to detect and expose dangerous heresies but also that the church is the nursing mother of all believers. God has ordained that preachers preach the gospel, that faith comes by hearing (Rom. 10:17), that men are regenerated by the word of God (1 Pet. 1:23). Further, all men under ordinary circumstances receive their Christian education and nourishment from the ministry of the word. The church is the only God-ordained instrument of preserving and propagating the truth so that it will not perish from the face of the earth. God, of course is not dependent on the church. He could send legions of angels to do His bidding. But, in His infinite wisdom He has determined that men would be saved by the preaching of mere sinful mortals. God did not ordain or authorize para-church organizations to protect and propagate the truth. Neither has God given other institutional spheres this all important responsibility. (For example, when doctrinal controversies arise, the civil magistrate can only call a general assembly or council of the church to resolve such a matter.)

Most theonomists do not recognize the importance of the church in God's kingdom plan. Society or culture will follow the church whether for good or for ill. It was only when the churches perverted doctrine, worship and discipline that the robes of society were captured by atheists and secular humanists. Thus, judgment must begin with the household of God (1 Pet. 4:17).

A low view of the church, the pattern of following para-church organizations and the continued need to raise money are all reasons why (generally speaking) the Christian reconstruction movement has been very deficient doctrinally. It has drawn many toward Eastern Orthodoxy, high church Episcopalian and Romanist worship. It (ironically) has been antinomian with regard to the first table of the law (e.g., the defense of pictures of Christ, the open propagation of anti-sabbatarian views, the love affair with the liturgical calendar and extra-biblical holy days such as Christmas). It has adhered to an unbiblical dangerous ecumenicalism (e.g., people who deny the gospel are often tolerated [Arminians, Romanists, Shepardites] as long as they adhere to some of the general principles of Christian reconstruction). It has adopted an Episcopal-Romanist concept of church authority by denying the regulative principle of worship or *sola scriptura* in the ecclesiastical sphere. In other words, they believe the church has the right to autonomously determine worship ordinances, rites, ceremonies, holy days and rituals as she pleases as long as they are not explicitly forbidden by Scripture. It has also denied *sola scriptura* in its ecumenical embrace of the Charismatic movement

which teaches that divine revelation continues.

When the church is downplayed and its role as the pillar and ground of the truth is placed on the back burner, what often happens is that pragmatic concept of “taking dominion” fills the void. Note, however, that antinomian concepts of worship, a rejection of Reformed confessionalism, an ecumenical cooperation with damnable heretics and a de-emphasis on the local church will not bring reformation or revival to American society. The modern reconstructionist movement is schizophrenic and doomed to failure because it is antinomian, pragmatic and unconfessional. That is, for the sake of an unbiblical ecumenical cooperation it sets aside the highly developed Reformed creeds and confessions [e.g., the Westminster Standards, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, etc.] for a mere acceptance of the early ecumenical creeds which Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Arminian Charismatic, and high church Episcopalian can all agree on. Further, many in the Christian reconstructionist camp have shifted from Reformed orthodoxy to what they call “classical Christianity” which involves a denial of justification by faith alone, a rejection of biblical worship, and acceptance of baptismal regeneration [i.e., sacramentalism] and the advocacy of paedocommunion.

(d) The church is not merely a means to an end but is also the ultimate end or object of all of God’s work throughout history. While it is true that Christ’s dominion extends to all nations and all earthly institutions and even the non-elect receive *indirect* benefits from Jesus’ redemptive work (e.g., laws based on Scripture, an orderly society, etc.), one must never forget that only the church continues in the eternal state. All the wicked will be cast into the lake of fire and the existence of other earthly institutions such as the state and even individual families will cease. Yes, it is indeed true that the whole earth will be glorified (Rom. 8:20 ff.). However, it is glorified to be a fit place for Jesus and His glorified saints. The Confession of Faith says: “As the providence of God doth in general reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of His church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof” (5:7).

A. A. Hodge writes, “[T]he providential government of God over mankind in general is subordinate as a means to an end to his gracious providence toward his Church, whereby he gathers it out of every people and nation, and makes all things work together for good to those who are called according to his purpose (Rom. viii. 28), and of course for the highest development and glory of the whole body. The history of redemption through all its dispensations, Patriarchal, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Christian, is the key to the philosophy of human history in general. The race is preserved, continents and islands are settled with inhabitants, nations are elevated to empire, philosophy and the practical arts, civilization and liberty are advanced, that the Church, the Lamb’s bride, may be perfected in all her members and adorned for her Husband.”<sup>52</sup>

While the unregenerate will receive temporary benefits because of the gospel and the Christian worldview’s effect on society (e.g., just laws, just courts, free market economics under God’s law, science based on Scripture instead of humanistic fantasies, etc.), one must not forget that the people in such a society who reject the gospel will receive greater damnation in hell because they spurned the greater light before them. To argue that temporary benefits to unregenerate chaff are more important in God’s plan (or are the central focus of the kingdom), than the loving cultivation of Jesus’ wheat is absurd. The only reason that the chaff are even tolerated in time and history is because a premature harvest may cause harm to God’s wheat—the elect. Christ’s dominion over the

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<sup>52</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1961 [1869]), 101.

chaff—the heathen-- is not one of love but judgment. They are crushed with a rod of iron (Ps. 2) and cast into the outer darkness.

## Conclusion

We are not denying the priesthood of all believers, the necessity of every individual believer to apply the Bible to their own particular spheres of influence and vocation, the great importance of the Christian family in the task of dominion (e.g., there is a sense in which the family is the nursery of both the church and state), the truth of the Great Commission and postmillennialism, the necessity of teaching all of God's law to the nations (e.g., the Ten Commandments, the moral case laws, historical examples, prophetic applications and New Testament imperatives) and so forth. However, we must, as Reformed believers, reject the trivialization of the church by many Reconstructionists. Only a distinctly Reformed, confessional, Presbyterian theonomy that respects the central role of the institutional church in the Great Commission and godly dominion can have a lasting impact on society and culture. While we must reject unbiblical pietism, negative amillennialism, defeatism and retreatism which all flow from a lack of faith and an unbiblical exegesis of Scripture, we must also avoid the unbiblical, disastrous teachings of many in the reconstructionist movement. The biblical teachings of theonomy will continue within confessional Presbyterianism which originally was theonomic and postmillennial to the core. Sadly, however, the splintered remnants of the Christian reconstructionist movement will likely join the dust bin of history as it embraces one new false doctrine after another (e.g., interpretive maximalism, the so-called "informed principle of worship," Norman Shepard's heretical doctrine of justification, paedocommunion, the Auburn teaching on the objectivity of the covenant, etc.).

## III. The Time of the Kingdom

A crucial question that needs to be considered regarding the kingdom of God is: When does the kingdom of God begin? Did it begin during our Lord's first advent or must it await the second coming of Christ? This question is important because when the present existence of the kingdom is denied, either explicitly (e.g., The dispensational premillennialists' theory that the kingdom was postponed until the second coming because the Jews rejected Jesus' offer of the kingdom) or implicitly (e.g., The historic premillennialists' concept of a present but a hidden, unrecognized, impotent kingdom; or, the amillennialists' disembodied spirits' ruling with Christ in heaven version of the kingdom, etc.), there is a strong tendency of the churches toward cultural irrelevance and retreatist pietism. Sadly, today the vast majority of professing Christians in America hold to the dispensation premillennial concept of the kingdom, a position which we will see is totally contrary to the teaching of Scripture.

### *A. The Kingdom Is At Hand*

A reading of the gospels proves that both John the Baptist and Jesus believed and taught that the kingdom of God began during our Lord's first advent. John preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is *at hand*" (Mt. 3:2). "To declare that the kingdom 'is at hand' means that the decisive

establishment or manifestation of the divine sovereignty has drawn so near to men that they are now confronted...with the ineluctable necessity of repentance and conversion.”<sup>53</sup> Robertson writes, “It was a startling word that John thundered over the hills and it re-echoed throughout the land. The Old Testament prophets had said that it would come some day in God’s own time. John proclaims as the herald of the new day that it has come, has drawn near. How near he does not say, but he evidently means very near, so near that one could see the signs and the proof.”<sup>54</sup>

Our Lord began His ministry with a message identical to that of John. “From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is *at hand*’” (Mt. 4:17) “Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is *at hand*. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk. 1:14-15; cf. Mt. 4:17). When Jesus had completed His ministry at Galilee and was about to focus His attention on Jerusalem He chose seventy disciples to go into every city before proclaiming, “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Lk. 10:9). The nearness of the kingdom was an essential aspect of the earliest gospel preaching. “What it implied must have been clear, at least in part, to every Jew. It was the announcement of the kingdom of Messiah, David’s Son. What they did not understand was the real nature of that kingdom, and the way it was to be introduced.”<sup>55</sup> When John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostles and the seventy disciples preached that the kingdom was about to break forth in history, they obviously did not mean 2,000 years in the future. Further, the prophetic statement that the kingdom is at hand does not speak merely of an offer of the kingdom but the kingdom itself. The dispensationalists’ teaching of a postponed kingdom turns John the Baptist, Jesus and the apostles into false prophets.

### *B. The Kingdom Is a Present Reality*

The gospels also teach that God’s kingdom began during Christ’s ministry. Jesus said during His own lifetime that the kingdom was a *present* reality: “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Mt. 12:28; cf. Lk. 11:20). Did Jesus cast out demons by the Spirit of God during his earthly ministry? Certainly! The verb that Jesus used (*epthasen*) is explicit. “The tense is interesting: the demon expulsions show that the kingdom is not merely on the way, but ‘did already reach to you’ (We should say ‘has reached,’ R. 842), is in your very midst.”<sup>56</sup> “The kingdom is not just pressing in upon men: it has come.”<sup>57</sup> Spurgeon writes, “Our Lord in effect says—*If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God*, then is a new era begun: the divine power has come into distinct conflict with the evil one and is manifestly victorious. In my person is ‘*the kingdom of God*’ inaugurated, and you are placed in a position of gracious advantage by my being among you. But if the devils be not cast out by the Spirit of God, the throne of God is

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53 David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 90.

54 Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, n. d. [1930]), 1:24. R. C. H. Lenski writes, “The reason for repentance is: ‘for the kingdom of the heavens had drawn ‘has come near,’ the perfect tense *ēngiken* (*engizo*) is durative-punctiliar R. 895): has been drawing near and is thus now at hand” (*The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 93).

55 Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 66.

56 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961 [1946]), 637.

57 David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 217.

not among you, and you are grievous losers. The overthrow of evil is a clear proof that the kingdom of grace has come.”<sup>58</sup> The Messiah’s demonstration of power against the hosts of evil is proof positive that God’s kingdom came into being nearly 2,000 years ago in Palestine. Thus, men were entering it in Jesus’ day. “The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing [present tense] into it” (Lk. 16:16). Hendriksen writes, “With John the Baptist the new dispensation, that of *fulfillment*, arrived, as is clear from the fact that John pointed to the Christ as being actually present (John 1:29, 36). With John, therefore, a new stage in the history of God’s kingdom had arrived (cf. Mark 1:1-4; Acts 1:22; 10:37), and the gospel of the reign of God in hearts and lives was being proclaimed by message and confirmatory signs. Everyone who wishes to belong to this sphere of light and love will have to enter that kingdom in the manner indicated; that is, by vigorously entering into it.”<sup>59</sup>

In John’s gospel Jesus not only says that He is a king, He also says that is the very reason He is born into the world. “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here’. Pilate therefore said to Him, ‘Are You a king then?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say rightly that *I am a King*. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth’” (Jn. 18:36-37). “That He was ‘king’ our Lord would not deny, but boldly acknowledged ‘to this I was born,’ knowing full well what would be the cost of His affirmation.”<sup>60</sup> “The kingship which the Jews completely rejected and Pilate affirmed ironically is a fact. John will not let us miss it.”<sup>61</sup> “The immediately following context leaves room for only one interpretation, namely, that Jesus is replying ‘You say that I am a King,’ definitely meant that Pilate was correct in inferring that the prisoner possessed and claimed royal authority!”<sup>62</sup>

### *C. Jesus’ Doctrine Assumes the Presence of the Kingdom*

The presence of the kingdom is also taught in the parables. In the parable of the sower Jesus compares the kingdom of God to seed which is sown in the hearts of men (Mk. 4:3ff.). The seed is the word of God (Lk. 8:11) preached by Christ, the apostles and ministers of the gospel throughout history. “The kingdom is like a treasure which men find, a pearl the possession of which men can now acquire (Matt. 13:44-46).”<sup>63</sup> Further, Jesus instructed men to seek the kingdom of God in the here and now (Mt. 6:33). “When Jesus said to a scribe that he was not far from the kingdom of God (Mark 12:34), he must have referred to something that was present and not far off in the future.”<sup>64</sup>

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58 Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987), 154.

59 William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 774.

60 Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975 [1945]), 3:201.

61 Leon Morris, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 770.

62 William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 409. Calvin writes, “*Thou sayest that I am a king*. Although Pilate had already learned, from the former answer, that Christ claims for himself some sort of kingdom, yet now Christ asserts the same thing more firmly; and, not satisfied with this, he makes an additional statement, which serves for a seal, as it were, to ratify what he said. Hence we infer, that the doctrine concerning Christ’s *kingdom* is of no ordinary importance, since he has deemed it worthy of so solemn an affirmation.” (*Commentary on the Gospel of John* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 2:211).

63 George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 65.

64 *Ibid.*

Indeed, people were entering God's kingdom during our Lord's earthly ministry (e.g., Mt. 21:31).

#### *D. The Kingdom Is Present With Power*

Jesus told His disciples that some would be alive personally to see the kingdom of God present with power." "He said to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power'" (Mk. 9:1). "He is saying that some of those whom he is addressing...are going to see the kingdom or kingship or reign of God come 'with power.' The reference is in all probability to Christ's glorious resurrection, his return *in the Spirit* on the day of Pentecost, and in close connection with that event his position, with great power and influence, at the Father's right hand."<sup>65</sup> The interpretation that says there are people living two thousand years in the future that will not die until the kingdom comes in power clearly violates simple rules of biblical interpretation. Would the audience that heard Jesus' promise have regarded His words as referring to people not yet born?

The Bible teaches that Christ received His kingship with power at His resurrection (Rom. 1:4), thus the resurrection is the turning point of all human history. While it is true that Jesus was the King prior to His glorious resurrection, it was kingship veiled by His state of humiliation. Prior to His resurrection Christ was the suffering servant who consciously limited His ministry to the tiny nation of Israel. However, when our Lord rose from the dead He was *invested with power* by the Father. He then could display this power by sending out His Holy Spirit and spiritually conquering the whole earth. What was made definitive by His death (i.e., victory over Satan, sin and death) can now progressively leaven all nations. Therefore, the resurrected Lord declared to His disciples: "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age'" (Mt. 28:18-20). Gentry writes,

In the Great Commission the claim of Christ to have received from God "all authority in heaven and on earth" formalizes *judicially* what was already true metaphysically: God's rulership over all. That is, Christ in His eternal Person as God the Son always possesses authority in Himself; it is intrinsic to His very divine being. But in terms of the *economy of redemption* (the outworking of salvation), the Second Person of the Trinity humbled Himself from His exalted position and made Himself of "no reputation" (Phil. 2:7) by taking on a human body and soul. He did this in order to secure redemption for His people, by living under the *Law* and suffering the *judicial consequences* of its breach by them. The *judicial declaration* of the acceptance of His redemptive labor by the Father was at the resurrection, which historical event led to His being granted "all authority" as a conquering King.<sup>66</sup>

On the basis of Christ's universal authority in heaven and on earth the apostles are commanded to go and make disciples of all nations. In the Bible, the resurrection, ascension and enthronement of Christ are treated organically as an aspect of His exaltation.

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<sup>65</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 333.

<sup>66</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Greatness of the Great Commission* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), 42.

The prophet Daniel in a vision of the ascension of Christ says clearly that Jesus received the kingdom at the ascension not the second coming. “I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and *a kingdom*, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and *His kingdom* is one which will not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13-14). This passage does not speak of the Lord *descending* in the clouds at the second coming as many suppose. It rather speaks of the resurrected Savior *coming up* to the Father to receive His eternal reward, to be publicly glorified before the angels and saints in heaven. It speaks prophetically of the commencement of Jesus’ reign at the right hand of power. It should never be connected with the second coming when history comes to a close and the kingdom is handed to the Father (cf. 1 Cor. 15:23-24).<sup>67</sup> The apostle Peter concurs when he speaks of Jesus’ exaltation. “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). Obviously God did not make Jesus Lord in the sense of a divine person at the resurrection for Christ was already God. His lordship in this passage refers to the mediatorial sovereignty bestowed at the resurrection. The humble servant is *now* the messianic king over the whole universe.

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67 Premillennial scholars are aware that 1 Cor. 15:23-24 is an excellent proof text against their position; therefore, they have attempted to circumvent the clear meaning of this passage primarily in two ways. Some premillennialists argue that “then comes the end” does not refer to the consummation of all things but to the end *of the resurrection*. They interpret the passage to mean, Athen, sometime in the distant future comes the end; i.e., the resurrection of the wicked.” R. C. H. Lenski refutes such an interpretation. He writes, “Paul simply writes, ‘Then the end,’ and omits the verb as not being necessary. Our versions translate quite correctly: ‘Then cometh the end,’ and use the present tense. Those who think of a double resurrection supply a future tense: *estai*, ‘then *will be* or *shall come* the end.’ This permits the interval which they find, for they may extend this future tense into a thousand years, or as far as they please. The only difficulty is that Paul sets down no verb and no tense; and a doctrine which is based on a verb or a tense that is inserted rests on what does not exist. ‘Then the end,’ with neither a verb nor a tense of any kind, means ‘then at the Parousia.’ No known rule of language allows us to supply a future tense, to say nothing about the long interval....What Paul says is that the Parousia and the resurrection usher in the end, namely the abolition of all hostile powers (here, indeed, including the wicked) and the transfer of the kingdom to God” (*The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 672-74). A second argument is based on the Greek word for then (*eita*). It is argued that the word then can mean whatever sequence of time one pleases, either immediately or far off into the future. Thus the passage could be paraphrased, “Christ the first fruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming. Then, after the 1000 year millennial reign is over comes the end.” This argument is disproved by the simple fact that the adverb *eita* in the N.T. never refers to a long interval of time. It is the adverb used to denote a short period of time (cf. Mk. 4:17, 28; 8:25; Lk. 8:12; Jn. 13:5; 19:27; 20:27; 1 Cor. 12:28; 15:5, 7; 1 Tim. 2:13; 3:10; Heb. 12:9; Jas. 1:15). Note how Paul uses two different adverbs in this passage: one to denote a long interval, and another to denote a short interval. “And we may observe, that while there is an order of succession between the three events noticed in verses 23 and 24 (namely, 1. The resurrection of Christ; 2. The resurrection of his people; 3. The end); yet the adverb *epeita*—denoting the order of succession between the first two (Christ’s resurrection and that of His people) where the interval is *long*—is no longer used to denote the order of *succession* in the *latter* two events (the resurrection of Christ’s people, and the end), but is changed for *eita*, as if for the purpose of marking to us that though there is a regularity of *order* in the events thus noticed, yet there is not a regularity as to the length of *interval*; so that the adverb suited to denote a *long* interval (*epeita*) in v. 23, is changed in v. 24 to *eita*, an adverb suited to denote a *short* interval.... [Thus] while the interval between the first two events—the resurrection of Christ, and that of His people—has been in our view *long*; the interval between the last two—the resurrection of Christ’s people and the *end*—will be one which in our view would be esteemed short” (Gipps, *First Resurrection*, quoted in David Brown, *Christ’s Coming: Will It Be Premillennial?* [Edmonton Canada: Still Water Revival Books, 1990 (1852)], 482-83).

The author of Hebrews says that after Christ suffered humiliation He was crowned with glory and honor by the Father: “You have made him a little lower than the angels; You have crowned him with glory and honor, and set him over the works of Your hands. You have put all things in subjection under his feet” (Heb. 2:7-8). “Christ’s enthronement is an accomplished fact ever since His ascension.... Today we are not waiting for a future kingship of Christ: He is now on His throne. Indeed, in the New Testament, the most quoted or alluded to Old Testament passage is Psalm 110. That passage records God the Father’s word to Christ the Son: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.’ In various forms it appears sixteen times in the New Testament. The sitting at the ‘right hand’ of God is a semantic equivalent to sitting on God’s throne, as is evident in Rev. 3:21: ‘I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.’”<sup>68</sup> Thus Peter could preach, “Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior” (Ac. 5:31). If the apostles were teaching (as premillennialists do) that Christ’s kingship was far off into the future, then why did the Jews accuse them of preaching the kingship of Christ? “These are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus” (Ac. 17:7).

If Christ’s kingship and the millennial reign are future events, then why does the Apostle Paul always describe Christ’s enthronement with past tense verbs? “He put all things under His feet and gave Him to be head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:22). “God has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name” (Phil. 2:9). Why does Paul, writing in the first century, use the present tense to describe the reign of Christ? “For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet” (1 Cor. 15:25).<sup>69</sup> Why does Paul tell the Colossian believers that they have been Atranslated [past tense] into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (Col. 1:13)? For the believers in the first century, the kingdom (the millennium) was a present reality.

In his prophetic explanation of King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream Daniel revealed that the kingdom of Christ would be established in the days of the Roman Empire: “And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever” (Dan. 2:44). The vast majority of interpreters (including dispensationalists) identify the four kingdoms as (1) the head of gold—the neo-Babylonian empire; (2) the breast and arms—the Medo-Persian empire; (3) the belly and thighs—the Grecian empire; (4) the legs and feet—the Roman Empire. Daniel says that the statue which represents these successive pagan empires is still standing when the kingdom of Christ is set up. “In Daniel 2:31-45, the kingdom of Christ is said to come down to earth as a stone to smite the world kingdom, existing under a fourth imperial rule. As we read through the passage, we learn that it grows to become a great mountain in the earth: ‘You watched while a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces.... And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth’ (Dan. 2:34-35).... In this imagery, we have both continuity over time and remarkable development: the stone grows to become a mountain. We also witness struggle and resistance: the stone eventually smashes the image. Finally, we rejoice in its fortunes: the image is thoroughly crushed. This gradual progress to victory against opposition is portrayed also in Daniel 7:26, where

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68 Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 221.

69 When Paul discusses the enthronement of Christ he uses the aorist tense, which indicates that Christ’s enthronement occurred at a point in time past. When he discusses the reign of Christ he employs a present active infinitive. Paul was convinced he was living in the millennium (in Christ’s kingdom).

we witness victory as ‘the result of many blows rather than of one.’ This process manifests progressive corporate sanctification in history”<sup>70</sup>

Premillennial dispensationalists recognize that this passage refers to the setting up of Christ’s kingdom (the millennium). But since they believe that the millennium occurs wholly in the future, they must engage in exegetical gymnastics to fit the vision into their system of interpretation. First, they must ignore the progressive growth of Christ’s kingdom from a stone to a mountain. The overthrow of the Gentile world power must be sudden and total to fit into their scheme. Yet Christ describes His kingdom as starting very small and growing progressively throughout history (Mt. 13:31-33). Second, in order for the passage to fit in with a wholly-future kingdom concept, dispensationalists have invented the idea of a wholly-future, revived Roman Empire. They interpret the phrase “in the days of these kings” as referring to the toes of the image. They argue that the toes of the statue and the ten horns of the fourth beast of Daniel 7 represent ten kingdoms which will form the basis of the future, restored Roman Empire. “Thus, it is argued, the time of the prophecy is fixed as being, not the first but the second Advent of Christ.... Christ will then come for His saints: the Church will be caught up to heaven, and the Stone will fall. This view must be rejected as being exegetically untenable. It makes too much of the symbolism. We are not expressly told that there are ten toes. The ten kings can be derived only from the ten horns of Dan. 7:24-27. That there are ten toes is merely inferred from the fact that the colossus appears in the form of a man. Furthermore, the image was not smitten upon the toes but upon the feet (2:34). Now the feet and legs are to be taken together (2:33).... Lastly, the phrase in the days of these kings cannot refer to the ten toes (*Gaebelein*), for the toes are nowhere identified as kings. Nor does it refer to the kings of the fourth monarchy, for no such kings are mentioned; the only kings or kingdoms mentioned are the four empires.”<sup>71</sup> The image represents four successive pagan empires. They are viewed organically because each incorporated the preceding empire. The statue is one. The kings obviously represent the four kingdoms represented by the statue. This should be obvious when we keep in mind that the recipient of the vision (Nebuchadnezzar) is the first king. “The kingdom of Messiah...was set up 1900 years ago in the days of the Caesars by Jesus and His apostles, and has been growing and spreading ever since.”<sup>72</sup>

### *E. What About Revelation 20?*

If the biblical evidence for the reign of Christ as King beginning at the first coming is so overwhelming, then why do the vast majority of evangelicals believe that the kingdom is wholly future, beginning at the second advent? The reason is that most evangelicals adhere to an unscriptural premillennial or dispensational understanding of Revelation chapter 20. They believe that this section of Scripture teaches that our Lord will set up His earthly kingdom at the second coming when He binds Satan and reigns personally on earth. This interpretation is then used to ignore or reinterpret

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<sup>70</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion*, 251.

<sup>71</sup> Edward J. Young, *Daniel* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1949), 78.

<sup>72</sup> Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 123. The fact that the dispensational interpretation of a revived Roman Empire was not held by any theologians or commentators prior to the invention of dispensationalism in the nineteenth century should make us highly suspicious of the revived Roman Empire concept. If a revived Roman Empire was what Daniel had in mind, we would expect someone prior to J. N. Darby to find it in the text.

the rest of Scripture to fit into the premillennial paradigm. While the dispensational premillennial understanding of Revelation is very popular in our day there are a number of reasons why it must be rejected as unscriptural.

(1) Premillennialists engage in a number of serious interpretive errors. First, they fail to recognize that as apocalyptic literature the book of Revelation was never intended to be taken totally literally. The key to understanding the book of Revelation is to see how the dramatic images, pictures and numbers are used in the rest of the Bible. Second, their over literal interpretation of the book causes them to fail to recognize that some parts of the book recapitulate periods of history. In other words, the book does not always set forth events in a straight forward chronological order. Third, they interpret the book in such a manner that it contradicts clear historical and didactic portions of Scripture. One should never use a difficult apocalyptic passage of the Bible to overturn dozens of clear passages. There are many passages that teach that the second coming, the day of judgment and the beginning of the final state occur contemporaneously (e.g., see 2 Th. 1:7-10; 1 Cor. 15:23-25, 50-54; Rom. 2:5-8, 16; 1 Th. 5:1-4, 9-10; 2 Pet. 3:4-12; Mt. 13:30, 36-43; 25:31-46; Jn. 5:28-29; 6:39-40, 44, 54).

(2) They do not recognize the biblical teaching that the binding of Satan occurred at the first coming and therefore this passage does not apply to the second advent. Revelation 20:1-10 describes what is to take place between the resurrection of Christ and the *parousia*. There are a number of reasons for this interpretation.

First, the binding of Satan with a great chain is figurative of a restraining power imposed on the devil. The purpose of this restraining power is so that “he should deceive the nations no more.” In the old covenant era the people of God were restricted to a tiny piece of land in Palestine. Satan held virtually the whole world in darkness. However, with the coming of Jesus and His victorious death over Satan, sin and death, the gospel is leavening every country on earth and the church will eventually disciple every nation.

Second, the Scriptures clearly teach that Satan was bound at the first coming of Christ. In Matthew’s gospel Jesus tells the Pharisees that He has bound the strong man (the devil) and is now plundering his goods (Mt. 12:28-29). In John’s gospel our Lord said regarding His coming crucifixion, “now the ruler of this world will be cast out” (Jn. 12:31). Christ came to earth “that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:8). Jesus said during His ministry “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Lk. 10:18; cf. vs.19; 9:1). The author of Hebrews associated the binding of Satan not with the second coming but with Jesus’ sacrificial death. Our Lord assumed a human nature “that through death He might destroy Him who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14). The verb destroy (*katargeo*) means literally to render inoperative, to nullify, or to render ineffective. The apostle Paul concurs: “Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” (Col. 2:15). In other words Jesus led “captivity captive” (Eph. 4:8). Satan received his death blow at our Lord’s first coming (Gen. 3:15).

(3) Premillennialists mistakenly interpret the 1,000 years literally and thus believe it is impossible for the millennium or kingdom to refer to the period between the two advents; which has at the present time lasted almost two thousand years. The number 1,000 in Scripture, however, usually refers to a fullness of quantity or a very large inexact number (cf. Dt. 1:11; 7:9; Ps. 68:17; 84:10; 90:4, etc.). For example the Bible says that God owns “the cattle on a thousand hills” (Ps. 50:10). This means that Jehovah owns all the cattle in the world; which is a vast number far beyond

1,000. Thus, the number 1,000 in Revelation 20 is symbolic and denotes a long, indefinite period of time.

(4) They fail to recognize that Revelation 20:9 refers to the second coming of Christ, not the end of a long period (1,000 years) *after* the *parousia*. According to premillennialists, Jesus and the saints are holed up behind the walls of Jerusalem, surrounded by a vast army and are rescued by God the Father who destroys the enemies of His people with fire from heaven. This interpretation is easily disproved from Scripture. Note the following reasons.

First, the idea that the all-powerful resurrected Messiah and the resurrected saints with their immortal glorified bodies would need deliverance from bullets and bombs which could not possibly harm them is absurd. Second, the Bible teaches that all judgment is committed to the Son (Jn. 5:22). Therefore, the fires of judgment are not sent to save the Son but rather are sent by the Son to save His people. Third, the idea that Jesus is holed up in Jerusalem waiting to be delivered by heaven amounts to a second humiliation of Christ which is contrary to His post-resurrection state of exaltation.

Fourth, the Bible teaches that Jesus is not on earth when fire falls from heaven to destroy the wicked because Scripture always ties the flaming fire to the second coming and not a period 1,000 years later. Note how Isaiah describes the second coming of Christ: “For behold, the LORD *will come* with fire and with His chariots, like a whirlwind, to render His anger with fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire and by His sword the LORD will judge all flesh” (Isa. 66:15-16). Paul warns Christians that when Christ returns, their works will be tested by fire: “Each one’s work will become manifest; for the day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:13-15). Where is Christ when the fire falls from heaven in judgment on the wicked? Is He on earth in Jerusalem, as premillennialists assert? No, Christ cannot be in Jerusalem because He returns in flaming fire. Thus, according to the abundant testimony of Scripture, Revelation 20:9 refers to the second coming of Christ. Why is this significant? Because it means that Christ returns at the *end* of the millennium; Christ’s coming is postmillennial. Christ is not *saved* by flaming fire; He *returns* in flaming fire. If the clear passages of Scripture are allowed to interpret the unclear, the Bible teaches a postmillennial return of Christ.

(5) Premillennialists misinterpret the first resurrection as a general bodily resurrection of saints at the beginning of the millennium. There are many reasons why the premillennial interpretation of the first resurrection is untenable.

First, it completely contradicts the immediate context. In Revelation 20:4 we are told of saints who were killed during the great tribulation. According to the dispensational view these believers are martyred in the period immediately prior to the second coming and first resurrection. If the first resurrection applied to the beginning of the millennium (as defined by dispensationalists) then we would expect to see these martyred saints reigning with Jesus *on earth in their new resurrected bodies*. But in verse 4 these saints are viewed as souls in heaven not as resurrected saints on earth.

Second, there is absolutely nothing in the text which defines the first resurrection as a general bodily resurrection at the beginning of the future earthly 1,000 year reign. The expression “first resurrection” must be defined by the immediate and broader context of Scripture. Those who

participate in the first resurrection are identified as having three great blessings: they cannot be harmed by the second death (i.e., they cannot be cast into hell or the lake of fire because they are saved by Christ); they are priests of God and Christ (i.e., by virtue of the union with the priest-king they are forever elect servants of God); they reign with Christ (whether alive or physically dead all saints are seated with Jesus in the heavens [Eph. 2:5-6]) and are reigning with Him.

Third, note that John does not say that the Christians are literally resurrected but that they participate in the first resurrection. The first resurrection refers literally to the resurrection of Christ. He was the first one raised from the dead with an immortal glorified body. He is “the *first fruits* of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20); “the *first born* among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29); “the first born from the dead” (Col. 1:18), and, therefore God’s people are called the “church of the *first born* who are registered in heaven” (Heb. 12:23). It is by virtue of our union with our Lord in His glorious resurrection that we receive our *first resurrection*—regeneration; and, eventually our second resurrection—our bodily resurrection at the end of history.

Fourth, when speaking of the first resurrection of *believers* the Bible defines this resurrection as a spiritual resurrection (i.e., regeneration) and not a literal physical resurrection. Paul says that believers are “raised up” together with Christ: “even when we were *dead* in trespasses, [God] made us *alive* together with Christ (by grace you were saved), and *raised us up* together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:5-6). “And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses...” (Col. 2:13). These are explicit references to a spiritual resurrection.

Jesus identifies two separate resurrections. The first pertains to the soul and is conditioned upon hearing and believing. The second pertains to the body and refers to the resurrection on the last day. “Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and *now is*, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live” (Jn. 5:24-25). “The first resurrection has nothing to do with the body; it concerns the soul. As soon as the word of Christ is accepted by faith...one ‘has everlasting life (on this see 1:4; 3:16) and has passed out of death into life’; and what else is this but *the first resurrection...*”<sup>73</sup> Jesus discussed the second resurrection in verses 28 and 29: “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.” “The second resurrection is physical in character. It pertains to the great day of the consummation of all things.”<sup>74</sup>

A biblical understanding of Revelation 20:1-10 completely disproves the premillennial concept of a future millennium or a dispensationally-defined, postponed kingdom. The kingdom of Christ or the millennial reign began almost two thousand years ago, is taking place now and will continue until our Lord returns in flaming fire to judge all men. Believers are to work in the here and now to disciple all the nations so that individuals, families, institutions and even civil magistrates will bow the knee to Christ in humble submission to His law-word.

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<sup>73</sup> John Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 1:201.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

#### IV. Kingdom of God—Kingdom of Heaven

The dispensational understanding of a postponed earthly Davidic kingdom is based in large part on the idea that the phrases “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” refer to two entirely different kingdoms. It is argued that the phrase “kingdom of heaven” refers to the earthly kingdom promised to Israel in the Old Testament prophets, while the phrase “kingdom of God” refers to the triune God’s comprehensive reign over all creatures. Classical dispensationalists teach that when Jesus went through Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom He was not speaking of the need to believe in His person and work for salvation, but rather He was offering the Jews an earthly political kingdom with Himself as King. However, once the Jews rejected His offer of an earthly kingdom He began to offer the “gospel of grace.” The reason that the other gospels do not speak of the kingdom of heaven while Matthew’s gospel uses the phrase throughout the book (Exceptions are found in Mt. 6:33; 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43) is because Matthew alone is directed to the Jewish people. Old school dispensationalists go so far as to argue that everything in Matthew prior to chapter 13 has absolutely nothing to do with Gentiles or the church. Therefore, (we are told) the ethics of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5 to 7) have nothing to do with Christians.

A careful comparison of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) proves that the dispensational distinction between kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God is totally without foundation. The simple fact is that Matthew, writing to a predominately Jewish audience, preferred the phrase “kingdom of heaven,” while Luke and Mark, who wrote to a predominately Gentile audience, preferred the phrase “kingdom of God.” That these phrases are synonymous is proved by an examination of parallel passages. Note the following texts:

### Matthew

“From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the *kingdom of heaven* is at hand’” (4:17).

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the *kingdom of heaven*” (5:3).

“Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the *kingdom of heaven* is greater than he” (11:11).

“And from the days of John the Baptist until now the *kingdom of heaven* suffers violence, and the violent take it by force” (11:12).

“Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the *kingdom of heaven*” (13:11)

“The *kingdom of heaven* is like a mustard seed” (13:31).

“Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the *kingdom of heaven*” (19:14).

“Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the *kingdom of heaven*” (19:23).

### Mark

“The time is fulfilled, and the *kingdom of God* is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel” (1:15).

“To you it has been given to know the mystery of the *kingdom of God*” (4:11).

“To what shall we liken the *kingdom of God*.... It is like a mustard seed” (4:30-31).

“Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the *kingdom of God*” (10:14).

### Luke

“Blessed are you poor, for yours is the *kingdom of God*” (6:20).

“For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the *kingdom of God* is greater than he (7:28).

“The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the *kingdom of God* has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it” (16:16).

“To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the *kingdom of God*” (8:10).

“How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the *kingdom of God*” (18:24).

Not only are the phrases *kingdom of heaven* and *kingdom of God* used interchangeably in the synoptic gospels, but even in the gospel of Matthew itself the two phrases have the identical meaning.<sup>75</sup> “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, verily I say unto you, that a rich man shall hardly

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<sup>75</sup> Oswald T. Allis: “It would be natural that they should be [synonyms]. The thought of the kingdom is prominent in the Old Testament; and the passage which naturally suggests itself is Dan. 2:44 where we read: ‘And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed.’ This will be the kingdom of the God of heaven. Consequently, it is quite as proper to abbreviate it to ‘the kingdom of heaven’ and the ‘kingdom of God,’ as it is

enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Mt. 19:23-24). Dispensationalists have a further exegetical difficulty in the fact that Jesus continues to use the phrase “kingdom of heaven” in Matthew’s gospel long after the offer of a Davidic, earthly kingdom was supposedly withdrawn in chapter 12.

Given the abundant biblical evidence that the classical dispensational position is absurd and unscriptural, most modern dispensationalists have altered their opinion; teaching that in some contexts the terms are interchangeable. In other contexts the classical dispensational position is maintained. What has been occurring over the last generation and continues to occur is the death of dispensationalism by a thousand qualifications. As major tenets of the dispensational system are disproved, the system keeps adapting itself and evolving into something less absurd and more defensible. The weight of biblical truth is so contrary to the Darbyite system that dispensational scholars keep pulling out the white flag and surrendering in one area after another. The bottom line is that dispensational eschatology is a system imposed upon the Bible and not derived from it.

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[HOME PAGE](#)

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that ‘the ark of the covenant of the LORD’ should be called ‘the ark of the covenant’ and ‘the ark of the LORD’ (e.g., Josh. 6:6-8)” (*Prophecy and the Church*, 67).