The Church and the Kingdom[1]

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Abstract

The relationship between the church and the kingdom is hardly a new topic in Reformed theology. One might think that by now every imaginable facet of this matter would be settled. However, discussions in various parts of the world show how easily conversations degenerate into polemics that stifle the sacred responsibility "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). Perhaps vigorous polemics have served some positive ends in the past. However, at this time when interest in Reformed theology grows around the world, paths must be found that will move beyond the controversies of the past and toward more mutuality.

Keywords

Church and kingdom, covenant theology, Reformed confessions, Christ and culture, kingdom in Scripture, mission of the church, kingdom and eschatology

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I. *Our Theological Heritage and the Kingdom*

It will serve us well to begin our discussion of the church and the kingdom with a few words about our shared theological heritage. How do Reformed confessions and catechisms shape, or not shape, our contemporary outlooks on the relationship between the church and the kingdom? For the sake of time, we will offer a few comments on the Belgic Confession (BC), the Heidelberg Catechism (HC), the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), the Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC), and the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) and what they tell us about our topic.

In brief, these secondary doctrinal standards deal unevenly with the church and the kingdom. They refer to the church in a variety of contexts and occasionally at length. The Westminster Confession of Faith, for instance, devotes an entire chapter to the subject "Of the Church" (WCF 25.1–6). However, our doctrinal standards do not have much to say about God's kingdom and even less to say about the relationship between the church and the kingdom.

Consider how seldom our standards explicitly refer to the kingdom. As surprising as it may be, the Belgic Confession speaks of "the kingdom of Christ" only once (BC 36). Other standards offer a bit more, but not much. The Heidelberg Catechism refers to "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" to distinguish church and civil authorities, largely in opposition to Roman Catholicism (HC 82–85). It also briefly sheds some practical insights into the two times the word "kingdom" appears in the Lord's Prayer (HC 118, 123). The Westminster Shorter Catechism deals with references to "the kingdom" only in the Lord's Prayer (WSC 102, 107). The Westminster Larger Catechism offers a bit more explanation of "the kingdom" in the Lord's Prayer (WLC 191, 196) after mentioning that Jesus taught his disciples about "the kingdom of God" before his ascension (WLC 53). Finally, the Westminster Confession of Faith refers to our "everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven" (WCF 8.5), to "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" to distinguish ecclesiastical and civil authority (WCF 23.3 and 30.2), and to "the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ" (WCF 25.2) in its discussion of the visible church. This quick survey reveals that the theme of God's kingdom does not receive much attention in our doctrinal standards.

What do these documents have to say about the relationship between the church and the kingdom? The Westminster Confession of Faith stands out as the only place that explicitly connects the terms "church" and "kingdom":

> The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation. (WCF 25.2)

We will make four brief observations on this paragraph. First, the association between the church and the kingdom focuses exclusively on the concept of "the visible Church." For this reason, when I speak of the "church" in this article, I will always have in mind the visible church rather than the invisible church.

Second, this paragraph focuses primarily on the church and the kingdom in the New Testament age "under the Gospel" and only notes that it is "not confined to one nation as before under the law." Along these lines, it describes the kingdom as "the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ" and offers no more insight into how the kingdom of God in the Old Testament age helps us understand the relationship between the Christian church and the kingdom.

Third, this passage also states that the visible church "consists of all … that profess the true religion; and of their children." In so doing, the Confession focuses on the church as consisting of people, not as an institution. Presumably, the service of the people of the church to God is also in view by metonymy. This focus on people and their service to God fits well with the Old Testament use of *qahal* (קָהַל; "to form an assembly") as the assembly of the people of Israel. The Septuagint usually translates this terminology *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία) and represents the backdrop of the New Testament "church" as consisting of people and their service in the New Testament.

Fourth, the Confession explicitly touches on both sides of our topic by declaring, "The visible Church … is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ." Unfortunately, the language here raises a difficult question. Are we to believe that the visible church and the kingdom are simply one and the same? Such a posture would be difficult to maintain if we go much beyond thinking that the Westminster Assembly simply affirmed here that those who serve God as the people of the visible church also serve him as the people of his kingdom.

Frankly, I wish that our doctrinal standards had much more to say about the church and the kingdom, but they do not. I find that frustrating at times. However, I also believe that we have much to learn from this lack of attention. If nothing else, we have a lot of work to do if we hope to understand these matters more fully.

Allow me to make one crucial observation at the outset of this presentation. Our confessional and catechetical heritage does not settle lines of

demarcation between acceptable and unacceptable points of view on many facets of our topic. There is a lot of room for different outlooks on the church and the kingdom in our branch of the church.

In my experience, all too often, modern Reformed theologians speak as if there is one and only one authentically Reformed viewpoint on our topic. Take, for instance, the often-vigorous discussions that currently take place among those who identify themselves with "theonomy," "two-kingdom theology," and "transformationalism."[2] Advocates of these views often strongly dismiss the others as "not being Reformed." Well, it seems to me that some articulations of these views likely venture beyond the parameters of our theological standards. Theonomists who hope to "take us back to the Old Testament theocracy," as is often said, would fall outside of our doctrinal standards. But I have never met one who actually believes this. Transformationalists who have "turned to the Social Gospel" have strayed, but I have never talked with one of them in evangelical circles either. Advocates of "two kingdom theology" have left the camp if they believe that "natural law can be used as our standard apart from Scripture." Once again, I have yet to come across one of them. Dangers abound for all three camps, and we should explore these dangers together, yet I am also convinced that all of us have much to learn from each other.

Given how little our doctrinal standards say about these matters, I would strongly suggest at the outset of this presentation that we would be wise to refrain from speaking as if there were one and only one legitimate articulation of Reformed outlooks on the church and the kingdom. We would be much better off acknowledging that there always have been, currently are, and likely always will be a variety of viewpoints that fit securely within the doctrinal parameters of our confessional and catechetical heritage. Perhaps then, we will be able to move toward a better understanding together.

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[2] For a survey of various Christian perspectives on Christ and culture, see D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 205–28; for an introduction to theonomy, see Greg Bahnsen, *By This Standard: The Authority of God's Law Today* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985); and for a critical evaluation of theonomy, see William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey, eds., *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), and John Frame, "*The Institutes of Biblical Law* [by Rousas John Rushdoony]: A Review," *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (Winter 1976) 195–217; for a presentation of the two-kingdoms approach, see David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), esp. 11–32; a critique of this theological approach can be found in John Frame, *The Escondido Theology* (Lakeland, FL: Whitefield Media Productions, 2011); for a concise presentation of a transformalist position, see Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

II. *The Importance of the Kingdom in Scripture*

The lack of attention to the relationship between the church and the kingdom in Reformed doctrinal standards raises a fair question. If our forebears did not deal with the details of this topic, then why should we explore it further? Why not let things stand as they are?

In many respects, the answer to this question lies in the importance of the concept of the kingdom in Scripture. As I am about to suggest, the kingdom of God was not just one of many biblical teachings. Biblical authors consistently relied on God's kingdom as the most integrative, metatheological framework for understanding the boundaries and interconnections among other biblical teachings. For this reason, our commitment to the Scriptures as "the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined" (WCF 1.10) requires us to ensure that we give the same priority to the kingdom of God in our discussions of ecclesiology.

In the past, many biblical interpreters wrongly held that the kingdom does not play a major role throughout the Bible. This is unfortunate because explicit biblical references to the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, and the like appear over 150 times in the New Testament. However, depending on how one handles several linguistic and text-critical issues, the Old Testament only refers explicitly to God's kingdom some fourteen times. It is no wonder, then, that so many interpreters in the past have had the impression that the concept of God's kingdom rose to prominence in the New Testament age.

From the middle of the twentieth century, however, several Old and New Testament scholars in our branch of the church have helped us see that the opposite is true.[3] While the terminology of God's kingdom may be rare in the Old Testament, the concept permeates every dimension of Old Testament theology. The complex theme of the kingdom of God is the most fundamental and pervasive theological orientation of every Old Testament author, and it gave rise to a more explicit focus on the kingdom in New Testament theology. Actually, this point of view should not surprise us. In God's providence, biblical authors wrote in the political and religious context of

[3] For several examples of recent works that have emphasized the kingdom in the Old and New Testaments, see Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 144–46; Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1981); Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans. H. de Jongste, ed. Raymond O. Zorn (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), 3–13; Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (1903; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 11–24.

emperors and empires. This was their world. As a result, the constellation of biblical teachings on the kingdom of God exerts great gravitational force throughout the universe of all biblical teachings. This gravitational pull of the kingdom is so powerful that our ability to understand other parts of the Bible is significantly diminished if we do not consider it—at times, immeasurably diminished.

We could point to this importance of the kingdom in Scripture in any number of ways, but for the sake of time, consider the opening verses of the Lord's Prayer where Jesus reflected the prominence of God's kingdom in both Testaments.

> Our Father in heaven,
> hallowed be your name.
> Your kingdom come,
> your will be done,
> on earth as it is in heaven. (Matt 6:9–10)

We can see how Jesus's opening words draw attention to the kingship of God when we acknowledge that his petition "hallowed be your name" (Matt 6:9) unmistakably alludes to Isaiah's vision of heaven in the temple in Isaiah 6:1–13. Jesus's call for the name of God to "be hallowed" (*hagiasthētō*, ἁγιασθήτω) echoes the prophet's vision of seraphim who cried, "Holy, holy, holy" (Isa 6:3). This allusion also clarifies what Jesus had in mind when he turned his disciples' thoughts toward God "in heaven." Although the term "heaven" is used in a variety of ways in Scripture, Isaiah spoke of heaven as the place where he saw "the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up" (Isa 6:1). Rather elaborate depictions of heaven as the Lord's throne room appear in a number of biblical passages (e.g., 1 Kgs 22:19–23; 2 Chr 18:18–22; Job 1:6–12; Pss 29, 82; Rev 4:1–11). Similar depictions of heaven also occur widely in the literature of ancient Near Eastern cultures and of the Greco-Roman culture of the New Testament period. When Jesus called on his disciples to turn their hearts toward God in heaven, he taught them to give attention to God as the king who is enthroned in the royal court of heaven.

Jesus also referred to the kingship of God when he initially addressed God as "Our Father." The Scriptures frequently refer to God as the Father of Israel and of Christ's followers. But what did it mean to speak of God in this way? We find the answer in the political literature of the ancient Near East. In other nations, kings were called the fathers of their subjects.[4] This

[4] For the use of the term "father" in Akkadian and Sumerian texts in relation to kings, see M.-J. Seux, *Épithètes royales Akkadiennes et Sumériennes* (Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1967), 25–26, 33,

paternal imagery extolled the fatherly love of kings toward those under their care. Jesus drew upon this widespread royal imagery when he spoke of God as Father. In fact, we may rightly sum up the depiction of God as king in the opening verse of the Lord's Prayer in this way. There, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Our [royal] Father, [enthroned] in heaven, hallowed be your name."

The importance of God's kingship comes into view through other biblical depictions of God as well. The Bible explicitly calls God "the king" many times, but these references represent only a small percentage of the times when he is acknowledged as the king. The nations surrounding Israel often extolled human kings as shepherds, light, wise architects, skilled builders, warriors, leaders of armies, lawgivers, covenant-makers, and covenant-keepers—to name just a few examples.[5] These and similar descriptions of God in the Scriptures extol the God of Israel as king. When we consider how often this happens in the Bible, it is no exaggeration to say that biblical authors conceived of God first and foremost as the supreme king over all of creation. If we were to answer the well-known Westminster Shorter Catechism question "What is God?" with this biblical emphasis in mind, we would have to say something like "God is the king, who is 'a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth'" (WSC 4).

We should also note that the opening verses of the Lord's Prayer directly connect the kingship of God with the kingdom of God. As he put it, "Our [royal] Father … Your kingdom come" (Matt 6:9–10). In so doing, Jesus expressed the conceptual inseparability of God's kingship and his kingdom. We are all familiar with the debate over whether *basileia* (βασιλεία, "kingdom") should be taken abstractly as "reign or rule" or concretely as "that which is ruled."[6] In my opinion, this distinction is of little value. A king's

384–85; for examples of the use of "father" terminology in ancient Near Eastern texts, see Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, eds., *Readings form the Ancient Near East*, EBS (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 137, 162, and 198; for an older study of royal titles in the ancient world and allusions to "father" vocabulary, see Robert D. Wilson, "Royal Titles in Antiquity: Article Two," *Princeton Theological Review* 2 (1904): 465–97, esp. 467, 474–75, 490, 493; and "Royal Titles in Antiquity: Article Three," *Princeton Theological Review* 2 (1904): 618–64, esp. 645.

[5] See the references given in the previous note. For kings as shepherds, see Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 58–74, 257–59; for ancient rulers' self-presentation as builders and gardeners, see Douglas J. Green, *"I Undertook Great Works": The Ideology of Domestic Achievements in West Semitic Royal Inscriptions*, FAT 2, Reihe 41 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 46–86, 307–15.

[6] For more on definitions, see Vos, *Kingdom of God and the Church*, 25–31; Ridderbos, *Coming of the Kingdom*, 24–29; and George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 60–61.

reign always has in view his reign over something. This is certainly the case in the opening of the Lord's Prayer.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of the fact that Jesus called on his disciples to pray about the king and his kingdom before they offered any other petitions. Jesus knew that at nearly every moment his followers were preoccupied with their need for daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance from the temptations of the Evil One. Still, he called for his disciples to address these concerns in prayer only after they had given attention to God's kingship and his kingdom.

The priority Jesus gave to God and his kingdom helps us grasp that we are not to pray about our other needs for our own sakes, not for our own well-being, or even our own eternal salvation. Rather, we are to ask for these things for the sake of something of supreme importance. As Jesus himself put it later, although we have many needs, we are to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt 6:33).

I have to admit that I often experience resistance from Reformed theologians to the suggestion that the kingdom of God has this much importance in the Scriptures. This resistance usually comes from those who align themselves with the Westminster standards, because the Westminster Assembly relied heavily on divine covenants as the highest, most comprehensive organizational framework of biblical teaching (see WCF 7.1–6, WLC 30–36; WSC 12, 16, 20, 92, 94). The Confession speaks of covenant as the means by which God condescended to bridge the gap between himself and humanity. "The distance between God and the creature" was overcome by a "voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant" (WCF 7.1). The Confession then goes on to organize all biblical material under two rubrics, the "covenant of works" (WCF 7.2) and the "covenant of grace" (WCF 7.3). In this approach to Scripture, these dual divine covenants represent the most unifying metatheological conceptual framework of Scripture. To be sure, this traditional outlook is fair enough as far as it goes. These dual divine covenants certainly provide a great many insights into the teachings of Scripture.

Still, we all know that from the middle of the twentieth century to our own day, the Reformed concept of covenant has undergone a significant transformation. Comparisons between divine covenants in the Bible and ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties and royal grants have revealed that biblical covenants were in fact historical administrations of God's kingdom.[7] The supreme divine king governed his kingdom through

[7] See, e.g., Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 36–37.

covenants much as ancient kings governed their kingdoms through their treaties, grants, and a number of other assorted types of texts. He regulated his kingdom by establishing covenants with the entire human race in Adam and Noah. He also administered his kingdom in Israel by means of covenants in Abraham, Moses, and David, as well as the new covenant or covenant of peace that was to begin after Israel's exile. We can no longer view divine covenants merely as the way God overcame the distance between himself and his creatures. We must reckon with the fact that his covenants were royal instruments by which he acted as king of all creation and administered the policies of his kingdom.

How does the importance of God's kingdom in Scripture impact our understanding of the relationship between the church and the kingdom? The kingdom provides an indispensable orientation for every facet of biblical ecclesiology. Consider just a few questions. Who are the people of whom the visible church consists? They are the subjects of God's kingdom. What is the potential scope of service required of the people of the church? It is the potential scope of service required of the people of the kingdom. What is the goal of the church? It is the goal of God's kingdom. If we fail to cast our concept of the church in the mold of the kingdom, we fall short. The concept of God's kingdom shapes every contour of biblical teaching about the church.

III. *The Coming of the Kingdom*

Having noted how the importance of God's kingdom encourages us to move forward in exploring the relationship between the church and the kingdom, we are in a position to consider how the Lord's Prayer also calls on us to focus on the coming of the kingdom. As Jesus put it,

> Your kingdom come,
> your will be done,
> on earth as it is in heaven. (Matt 6:9–10)

To grasp why Jesus brought the coming of the kingdom to the foreground in his prayer, it will help to set it within the context of another biblical perspective on the kingdom that lies in the background of what he said.

I have in mind a belief about God's kingship and kingdom that distinguished normative Israelite religion from the religions of most other ancient Near Eastern cultures. Faithful Israelites believed that God has been enthroned in heaven from the moment of creation and that he will

forever remain the supreme king over all (e.g., Ps 10:16; 29:10; 45:6; 103:19; 145:13; 146:10). In the polytheistic and henotheistic cultures of nations surrounding Israel, major events on earth were often interpreted as reflections of changes in the status of gods in the court of heaven. Gods rose and fell with the annual cycles of the seasons. Economic hardships and prosperity also indicated that shifts had occurred in the hierarchy of the heavenly court. Defeats and victories of nations on earth were thought to indicate the subjection of one god to another. All biblical authors and Jesus himself knew that Israel's faith stood in sharp contrast with these false beliefs. The one God, the God of Israel, has always ruled with complete control over every historical vicissitude. From the beginning, the entire creation has been his kingdom. He always has held and always will hold absolute royal authority over it all.

This biblical teaching, however, raises a serious question. Why, then, did Jesus call on his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom *come*"? If the entire creation has always been and will always be his kingdom, then in what sense can his kingdom "come" or "arrive" at some moment in history?

Jesus's petition reflected two additional biblical teachings that he knew well from the Scriptures. In the first place, God decreed that his unchanging, supreme rule over all was to be manifested in the sight of his creatures. This is why Moses declared, "The Lord will reign forever and ever" (Exod 15:18) after witnessing the power of God at the sea. In a similar way, when David completed his preparations for the temple, he also honored the Lord by affirming, "Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all" (1 Chr 29:11). Biblical authors celebrated manifestations of God's kingship every time they wrote about him acting as the royal shepherd, light, wise architect, skilled builder, warrior, leader of armies, lawgiver, covenant-maker, covenant-keeper, and the like. Historical displays of God's unending reign over all of creation fill the Scriptures. In this light, we can see that Jesus's prayer for the kingdom to "come" was not unusual at all. He led his disciples to ask God to manifest his absolute rule over all once again in the history of the world.

In the second place, Jesus's prayer for the coming of the kingdom also reflected the Old Testament teaching that every historical display of God's kingship was for an ultimate purpose or goal. To see how this is true in detail would require a review of every event in the Old and New Testaments. In broad terms, however, the path of this teleological vector can be traced by noting how God administered his kingdom through covenants. As we have already mentioned, comparisons of biblical covenants with royal documents from the ancient world have shown that God's covenants

established the policies by which he administered his kingdom. For this reason, his covenants in Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David and the new covenant in Christ are not somehow opposed to each other. Nor is one cast aside as useless in favor of another. Rather, they represent points, as it were, on the same historical trajectory, a trajectory that stretches throughout the Bible and leads to the final goal that the king of heaven ordained for his kingdom from the beginning.

In many branches of the church, this teleological continuity among God's covenants has been obscured by misunderstandings of New Testament teachings on the covenants in Moses and in Christ. In this popular outlook, the covenant in Moses is characterized as providing a way of salvation by works, and the new covenant in Christ is characterized as providing a way of salvation by grace.

This misunderstanding of New Testament teachings even subtly impacted our branch of the church as our scholars compared biblical covenants with documents from the ancient world. As capable Reformed scholars first began this project, they often aligned Moses's covenant with suzerain-vassal treaties and deemed it a conditional, obligatory covenant. However, they aligned the new covenant with royal grants and deemed it an unconditional, promissory covenant (along with the covenants in Noah, Abraham, and David).[8] This distinction even led some Reformed theologians to reaffirm an older and, in my opinion, unfortunate viewpoint in our branch of the church that referred to God's covenant with Moses as a "republication" of the covenant of works in Adam.[9]

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[8] For an early criticism of the distinction between conditional and unconditional covenants, see William Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 124; for a more extensive account in relation to the Davidic covenant, see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 243–52; see also, Gary N. Knoppers, "Ancient Near Eastern Royal Grants and the Davidic Covenant: A Parallel?," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116.4 (October-December 1996): 670–97, esp. 686–94; Richard P. Belcher Jr., *The Fulfillment of the Promises of God: An Explanations of Covenant Theology* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2020), 273–75. Thomas E. McComiskey also distinguishes sharply between covenant types in the Bible; see Thomas E. McComiskey, *The Covenant of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), and Richard L. Pratt Jr., review of *The Covenant of Promise*, by Thomas E. McComiskey, *Westminster Theological Journal* 49.1 (Spring 1987): 218–21.

[9] See Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), esp. 38, 48, 54, 74–75, 90, 90, 94–97, 175–76; for a discussion of the relationship between covenant of works and the Mosaic covenant in Reformed theology, see Brenton C. Ferry, "Works in the Mosaic Covenant: A Reformed Taxonomy," in *The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, ed. Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 90–98; for a discussion of Meredith G. Kline's view of the relationship, see Belcher, *The Fulfillment of the Promises of God*, 273–74.

In recent decades, however, ancient Near Eastern scholars have pointed out that these distinctions are not valid. Careful analysis has demonstrated beyond doubt that royal grants included conditions and obligations, much like suzerain-vassal treaties.[10] This should have come as no surprise. In the *Realpolitik* of the ancient world, maintaining a royal grant was always conditional upon the recipient's continued loyalty to the king. Like treaties, royal grants were obligatory.

This is why every biblical covenant included the same basic dynamics of divine/human interaction. As ancient kings administered their kingdoms, they all drew attention to God's royal benevolence toward his subjects, his requirements of grateful loyalty from his subjects, and his blessings for their obedience and curses for their disobedience. Divine covenants in the Bible represent not different paths leading in different directions but one path along which every manifestation of God's kingship in history fell.

At the same time, however, it is important to note that the emphases of each covenant in the Bible were tailored to suit the conditions of God's kingdom for the circumstances in which they were established. Different sorts of divine benevolence, different requirements for human loyalty, and different blessings and curses come into view with each covenant. The king was moving his kingdom toward a goal. To reach that goal, the divine king established different sorts of benevolence, requirements, blessings, and curses.

At the risk of oversimplification, allow me to illustrate how this was true of just one element, the requirement of human loyalty in every covenant. The covenant in Adam set in place the service of humanity for all time as images of God who were to serve God's kingdom by having dominion over the entire world. The covenant in Noah established stability in nature as the arena in which this service of the entire human race was to take place in every subsequent age. The covenant in Abraham focused on Israel's call throughout the ages to extend the blessings of God from the promised land to other nations. The covenant in Moses focused on the gift of law to guide the nation of Israel as generation after generation succeeded and failed in their service to God. The covenant in David established the royal dynasty

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[10] See, e.g., Knoppers, "Ancient Near Eastern Royal Grants and the Davidic Covenant: A Parallel?," 670–97; David Andrew Dean. "Covenant, Conditionality, and Consequence: New Terminology and a Case Study in the Abrahamic Covenant," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57.2 (2014): 281–308; Richard Pratt, "God of Covenant," *Reformed Perspectives Magazine* 10.5 (February 2, 2008), http://reformedperspectives.org/magazine/article.asp/link/http:%5E%5Ereformedperspectives.org%5Earticles%5Eric_pratt%5Eric_pratt.Covenant.ab_david.html/at/God%20of%20Covenant.

that would expand the dominion of God's kingdom throughout the world. The New Covenant was granted after Israel's exile to guarantee the complete and permanent fulfillment of the end for which all earlier covenants were enacted.

We must always keep in mind that the biblical record also tells us that, as God moved his kingdom forward, he always exercised his royal prerogative to enact the dynamics of his covenants as he saw fit. Often, the wisdom and goodness of his providence remained hidden from human beings. As Moses explained to Israel, the "secret things belong to the LORD our God" (Deut 29:29). Yet, as the recipient of divine revelation regarding mysteries in the past, Paul reviewed the ways of God in the past and exclaimed, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! … From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." (Rom 11:33–36). The apostle's amazement reassures us that God's benevolence, requirements for loyalty, and blessings and curses always led to his glorious end.

When will this ultimate end be fulfilled? Moses spoke of its fulfillment as taking place after Israel's exile ended "in the latter days" (*ep eschatō tōn hēmerōn*, ἐπ' ἐσχάτῳ τῶν ἡμερῶν [LXX]), or "in the end of days," as it may be translated (Deut 4:30). Israel's prophets and New Testament authors also spoke of the time of ultimate fulfillment in this way. For this reason, Christians have rightly described the fulfillment of God's purpose as the eschatological kingdom, the manifestation of his kingdom in the last days.

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come," he called for them to pray for the arrival of this eschatological manifestation of God's kingdom. A remnant of Israel had returned from exile long before the days of Christ, but continuing rebellion against God confined Israel to nearly half a millennium of suffering under the tyranny of other nations and their false, demonic gods. Because of the suffering of those centuries, in the days of Jesus, many in Israel longed for the final manifestation of God's kingship to arrive. The prophet Daniel had predicted that "a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor … left to another people … shall stand forever" (Dan 2:44; see also 4:3, 34; 6:26; 7:14, 27; Obad 21). As the "Son of God" fragment in the fourth cave at Qumran illustrates, near the time of Jesus, a number of Jewish sects expected that the royal son of God would soon establish "an eternal kingdom … his rule will be an everlasting rule" (4Q246 II, 5–9).[11] John the Baptist, Jesus himself, and his disciples announced that

[11] See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "4Q246: The 'Son of God' Document from Qumran," *Biblica* 74 (1993): 153–74, esp. 155–56; cf. Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 4th ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 332.

this final, glorious manifestation of "the kingdom of heaven [was] at hand" (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7). In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus called for his disciples to pray for this eschatological kingdom to come.

In the last two lines of the opening of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus went on to describe the wonder of the coming eschatological display of God's kingdom when he said, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). Here Jesus spoke of God's will in the sense of God's ideals or commands, what Reformed theologians often call the prescriptive will of God. Jesus knew all too well that rebellion against the commands of God filled the earth in his day, not only among the Gentile nations but within Israel as well, so he called on his disciples to pray for the arrival of the kingdom, when the earth would be filled with obedient servants of God.

But also notice Jesus's indication that in the eschatological kingdom, obedience to God will be rendered "on earth as it is in heaven." As mentioned earlier, when Jesus spoke of "heaven" in the Lord's Prayer, he had in mind the heavenly royal court of God. As biblical accounts of this celestial throne room reveal, every creature there obeys the divine king. So, when the eschatological kingdom comes, the same will be true everywhere on earth as well. The enemies of God will be eliminated from our planet, and every creature remaining will obey him here, as he is already obeyed in the court of heaven.

Now in our day, it is common to speak of the arrival of this eschatological manifestation of God's kingdom as "now, but not yet"—that is, the manifestation began with Jesus's first advent, but it will not come in its fullness until his second advent. Personally, I prefer to summarize the unfolding of the eschatological kingdom as coming in three phases.[12] The kingdom was inaugurated in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ and in the outpouring of the Spirit during the foundational ministries of Christ's apostles and prophets. The eschatological kingdom continues to spread everywhere on the earth throughout history as the Spirit empowers the church under the heavenly reign of the ascended Christ. The kingdom will reach its consummation sometime in the future when Christ returns and reigns forever with his people in the glorious new creation.

This Christian understanding of the eschatological age shocked many in Israel and led them to reject Jesus as the Messiah. It also confused many early followers of Christ. As John the Baptist faced execution, he asked, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Matt 11:3).

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[12] See Richard L. Pratt Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting Old Testament Narratives* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1990), 352–55.

As the decades passed, there was much need for authoritative explanations, and this is why we have the New Testament. It is not an overstatement to say that the New Testament was written to explain the unfolding of the eschatological kingdom and to address its practical implications for the church of Christ.

In recent decades, a number of Reformed scholars have explored an outlook on this purpose of the New Testament that has proven to be very insightful. Rather than offering one explanation of the coming of the eschatological kingdom, the New Testament authors addressed rather specific misunderstandings. Different practical implications of the unfolding eschatological age had to be clarified for different people. How did the unfolding of the eschatological kingdom apply to the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the church? What did it say about the influence of hypocritical legalism and the adoration of angels alongside Christ? How did it speak to busybodies and to the neglect of honorable work? What were the implications for arrogance that had led to factions in the early church? How did it address those who preferred their own spiritual insights over those of the apostles? What did it say to a runaway slave and his master? How did it address strife between rich and poor followers of Christ? What kinds of leaders did the church need? What did the unfolding of the eschatological kingdom have to say to Christians who found acceptance in their local communities and those who suffered persecution? The list of issues that rose in different times and places during the first century was very long. Yet, in one way or another, the books of the New Testament deal with them primarily in terms of the inauguration, continuation, and consummation of the coming of the kingdom in Christ.

This summary of the unfolding of the kingdom has many implications for understanding the relationship between the church and the kingdom today. We all live, work, and serve in what I have called the "continuation of the kingdom." But let me suggest a few ways we can learn a lot about how the church and the kingdom today relate to each other by turning our thoughts toward what lies behind and ahead of us, toward the inauguration and the consummation of the kingdom.

Consider first how much the church should be shaped by what happened in the inauguration of the kingdom. We turn there because of Paul's claim that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph 2:20). Even in our own day, we must build the church on a foundation that was laid over two thousand years ago.

There are at least three ways in which this is true. In the first place, we must build on the full authority of the writings of Christ's apostles and prophets collected in the New Testament canon. Now, I have every reason to believe that readers of this journal intend to follow this course, yet in my experience, it is often much easier to follow old traditions or to run enthusiastically to novel practices that may or may not faithfully follow Scripture. We must remain convinced that the apostolic and prophetic word of the New Testament is a precious gift the church given thousands of years ago, a blessing of the eschatological kingdom.

I am also confident that Reformed Christians are keen to build the church on Christ, the cornerstone. But once again, it is easy for Christ to be diminished in the church when we do not admire the moral perfection of his life, his miracles, the penal, substitutionary nature of his atoning death, his magnificent victory over death in his bodily resurrection, and his ascension into the court of heaven. It is the Christ of two thousand years ago whom we adore and whose good news we proclaim because he began the last manifestation of God's kingdom on the earth.

In all honesty, however, it seems to me that we may not be doing as well at building the church on the outpouring of the Holy Spirit during the inauguration of the kingdom. As I visit Reformed congregations in various parts of the world, I often worry that our dismay over the excesses we see in the name of the Spirit in other branches of the church has driven us to quench the Spirit. The Spirit has been given to the church as "the guarantee of our inheritance" in Christ (Eph 1:14). One of the best ways to determine the degree to which this is true is to ask if "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" abound in our churches (Gal 5:22–23). If not, we need to give much more attention to the Spirit, the love he instills within us for each other, and the power he gives to our gospel ministry to the world.

As important as it is for us to continue to build on the foundation of the inauguration of the kingdom, we must not only look to what lies behind us. We must also look to what lies ahead, to the future consummation of the kingdom. The full and never-ending manifestation of God's kingship over creation is our destiny.

In my experience, many faithful Christians in the Reformed branch of the church have never been given a compelling vision of their eschatological destiny. I have heard so many of our leaders respond to queries about the consummation with "I do not know anything about it." All too often, we leave those we lead with the popular visions of enjoying endless sunrises, golf games, and fishing expeditions in heaven. Or we press upon them more

pious images of singing in choirs forever. These options may assure us of goodness beyond the grave, yet they usually do not enable the people of the church to live as people of the kingdom.

Imagine the impact on every dimension of the church today when the biblical portrait of the consummation of the kingdom resides deeply within our hearts. On that day, we will be raised incorruptible to enter a glorious, new world. The judge of all the earth will look at us and say, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt 25:34).

Dark dystopian visions of the future of our world surround us today, but our hope for the future is utopia, a perfect new creation. At the consummation of our age, the corrupt, oppressive, violent kingdom of this world will "become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign forever" (Rev 11:15). When we fix our eyes on this compelling vision of our future as the people of the church and the kingdom, we will be "steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord [our] labor is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:58).