

This World and the Kingdom of God

By Greg L. Bahnsen

Virtually all Reformed believers maintain that the kingdom of Jesus Christ is (at least) a matter of Christ spiritually reigning within the hearts of those who are Christians. The *Westminster Larger Catechism* teaches that Christ executes the office of a king by, among other things, “bestowing saving grace upon his elect” (Q. 45), or to use Scriptural language: “Him has God exalted to His right hand to be a Prince and a Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31).

The internal, spiritual reign of Christ as Savior and Lord must not be overlooked or minimized in importance. One cannot enter into the kingdom of God apart from spiritual rebirth: “Truly, truly I say unto you, except one be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Those who are redeemed have already been transferred into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (Colossians 1:13) and as such appreciate that “the kingdom of God is . . . righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy spirit” (Romans 14:17). Postmillennialists have always affirmed this foundational doctrine that the kingdom of God is an internal, spiritual reality. For instance, J. Marcellus Kik, interpreted the “thrones” of Revelation 20:4 in this way: “The thrones stand for the saints’ spiritual dominion within himself and over the world. Through the grace of Christ they reign in life over the flesh, the world, and the devil” (*An Eschatology of Victory*, 1971, p. 210).

Is the Kingdom Merely Internal?

Without any sense diminishing the tremendous Biblical truth that the kingdom of God is an internal, spiritual reign of Christ within our hearts, we can go on to ask whether this perspective completely expresses all that God’s word reveals to us about the nature of God’s kingdom. Is it accurate to say that the reign of Christ extends beyond the heart of the believer? Does Christ reign in any external, visible, and this-worldly fashion as well?

Amillennialists are categorically hesitant to affirm that the present reign of the Messiah is visible and this-worldly. Some examples will show this to be the general rule among amillennial writers. Geerhardus Vos taught that other-worldliness ought to be “the dominating attitude of the Christian mind” (*The Pauline Eschatology*, 1930, p. 463). When we think of the kingdom of Christ prior to His return to glory, amillennialists would *not* have us think about “earthly-blessedness” (W. J. Grier, *The Momentous Event*, 1945, p. 160 or of “highly visible success of Christ through the church in earthly life and institutions” (Lewis Neilson, *Waiting for His Coming*, 1975, p. 346). Leading

amillennial writers explain that they are “opposed to the type of millennium taught by the postmillennialist” (William E. Cox, *Amillennialism Today*, 1966, p. 2). How So? Cox tells us that during “the present church age . . . Jesus Christ reigns in the hearts of his saints” (p. 65), and Meredith G. Kline insists that the present reality is “the Lord’s invisible reign on the theocratic throne of David in heaven” (*Westminster Theological Journal* XLI: 1978, p. 180). Since the postmillennialist does not deny for a second that Christ presently reigns in the hearts of his saints from an invisible throne in heaven, what *distinctive* viewpoint is being claimed by these amillennial teachers?

When one reads authors like Cox, Kline, Neilson, and others, it becomes obvious that what they object to in postmillennial writers is the inclusion of external, visible, this-earthly aspects within the scope of the kingdom of God in this age. The direction of their thought, as indicated in what Vos said above, is almost exclusively “other-worldly” or heavenly. This is clearly manifest in Walter J. Chantry’s recent book, *God’s Righteous Kingdom* (1980). Chantry claims that “Citizens of the kingdom are oriented to another world, not to this present earth” (p. 16). Indeed, Chantry holds that Christ has set aside the outward aspects of Old Testament religion: “By way of contrast Christ’s kingdom is inward” (p. 51), so that “material, social, external blessedness may not be sought in a millennium, but in the consummation of the kingdom at the coming of our Lord” (p. 62). Although Mr. Chantry attempts to qualify his remarks by admitting that the material, external world is not inherently evil, the heart of his theological outlook is revealed when he says that the Fall meant that man “raised animal desires above a longing for spiritual realities” (p. 20) and says that “worship and the winning of souls (are) . . . more important by far than the cultural mandate” (p. 27). Chantry makes himself quite clear:

“ . . . the kingdom of God is preoccupied with eternal and spiritual realities. It has to do with a presently invisible world. Its focal point is the inward man . . . The gospel of the Kingdom completely absorbs men *in the eternal rather than the temporal* . . . The gospel of the kingdom absorbs men *in the spiritual rather than the material*” (pp. 15, 19, emphasis original).

If men like Chantry were only indicating what our priorities should be, if they were only reminding us that internal regeneration is a prerequisite for external and consummated kingdom of God, then there would be little dispute. But their criticism of postmillennialists is concrete proof that much more is at stake in the above quotations.

Amillennialists either claim or tend to exclusively emphasize the other-worldly, invisible, internal nature of Christ’s kingdom as a spiritual reality. Our question is whether Scripture – the infallible standard for our doctrinal commitments – does not have something *more* to say than that the kingdom of God is presently expressed in the hearts of men. Is the kingdom merely internal?

Some Necessary Distinctions

Before we attempt an answer to our question, we should be reminded of some theological distinctions which must be made. First, we would differentiate the *providential* kingdom of God (His sovereign reign over every historical event, good or evil) from the *Messianic* kingdom of God (the divine rule which breaks the power of evil and secures redemption for God’s elect). God’s providential rule is indicated in Daniel 4:17, “The Most High rules in the kingdom of men,” whereas Daniel 7:13-14 refers to the redemptive, moral, and victorious reign of the messianic Son of Man: “one like unto a

son of man came with the clouds to the Ancient of Days . . . and there was given to him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom so that all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him.”

A second distinction which should not be forgotten is the distinction between “kingdom” and “church” in the Bible. These two words do not have precisely the same sense or meaning; otherwise, when Acts 28:23 tells us that Paul was testifying of the kingdom of God, we could just as well say that Paul was testifying about the church – which would be erroneous, given the context of Old Testament prophecy about the person and work of Jesus. “Kingdom” and “church” do not refer to the same entity either, for Matthew 13:38, 41 informs us that the scope of the kingdom is the world inclusive of the doers in iniquity – which is not true of the church. To be accurate, we should say that it is the kingdom of God which creates the church, and that the church in turn has the “keys of the kingdom” (Matthew 16:18-19). Neither statement would be true if we could not distinguish the two entities.

A third necessary distinction has to do with the Messianic kingdom (which has a broader scope than the church). We need to distinguish between this kingdom in the phase of Old Testament *anticipation* (cf. Matthew 21:43, where it is said to be taken away from the Jews), in the present phase of *established* realization (e.g., Matthew 12:28, where Jesus declares that the kingdom of God “has come upon you”), and in the phase of *consummated* realization at the return of Christ (e.g., Matthew 7:21-23, where entry into the kingdom is contrasted to being sent into everlasting damnation; cf. 8:12).

Christ’s Kingdom as This-Worldly

To recapitulate, we have observed that it is a foundational truth that the kingdom of Jesus Christ pertains to the Savior’s reign within the hearts of His people – a reign which originates from the Lord’s heavenly throne. Our question, to be precise now, asks whether the Messianic reign of Jesus (in contrast to His providential reign, and extending beyond the scope of the church) during the current period of its establishment (in contrast to its Old Testament anticipation and to its future consummation in the new heavens and earth) is exclusively spiritual, other-worldly, invisible, and internal (as amillennialists tend to assert). In short, in this present age is the kingdom of Jesus Christ other-worldly and restricted to man’s heart? Is it merely internal?

Our answer, if we are faithful to the full range of Biblical teaching on the subject, must be a definite *No*. The reign of Christ – His Messianic kingdom – is meant to subdue *every* enemy of righteousness, as Paradise is regained for fallen men by the Savior. As Isaac Watts poetically expressed it: “he comes to make His blessings flow, Far as the curse is found.” Everything touched by the guilt and pollution of sin is the object of the Messiah’s kingly triumph – everything. The kingdom of Christ not only brings forgiveness and new heart-love for God; it also brings concrete obedience to God in all walks of life. Those things which stand in opposition to God and His purposes and His character are to be overthrown by the dynamic reign of the Messianic King. The effects of Christ’s dominion are to be evident on earth, among all nations, and throughout the range of human activity.

This all-encompassing perspective is set forth by the Apostle Paul in the first chapter of Colossians, where it is revealed that *all* things were created for Jesus Christ (v. 16), that *all* things are restored by His redemptive work (v. 20), and consequently that in *all* things He should be given the pre-eminence (v. 18). Followers of Christ are exhorted to “be holy in all manner of living” (I Peter 1:15). As Paul puts it, “whether therefore you eat, or drink, or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory

of God" (I Cor. 10:31). The reign of Christ is not restricted to internal matters of the heart – to prayer, meditation, and piety. That is only the beginning. The kingdom of God "brings forth fruit" (see Matthew 13:23; 21:43) such that by means of the visible quality of a person's life his inner state of heart can be discerned: "by their fruits you shall know them" (Matthew 7:16-21). So then, even eating and drinking as external activities are included within the Messiah's reign. The inward reign of the Savior must become manifest in *public* righteousness: genuine hearing of the word, genuine religion, and genuine faith are seen in faithful doing of the law, outward helping of the oppressed, and practical aid to the afflicted (James 1:22-2:26). To restrict the reign of Christ to inward matters is to lose touch with the true character of submission to the King.

Christ does not settle for a part-time or restricted reign as King. He demands obedience in all things from us, and His aim is to subdue all resistance – of any nature (internal or external) – to His rule. Paul teaches, "he must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet," concluding with the defeat of death itself at the general resurrection (I Cor. 15:25-26). *All opposition in all areas* will be overcome by the King. And as it is, it will be an indication that the Messianic kingdom is coming. Christ taught His disciples to pray: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). That prayer is a continual reminder to us that the coming of the kingdom means the doing of God's will, and that the reign of Christ (His kingdom) through our obedience comes precisely here on earth. The kingdom of Christ is undeniably *this-worldly* in its effects and manifestation. To be sure, Christ's kingdom does not spring "out of this world" (John 18:36), meaning (as the end of the verse interprets matters for us) that the *source* of Christ's reign is not "from here." Nevertheless, His reign, as originating from God Himself, pertains to this present world. The resurrected, victorious Savior said it Himself: "all authority in heaven *and on earth* has been granted to Me" (Matt. 28:18).

We must admit, therefore, that the kingdom of Christ is not merely internal and other-worldly. It has *external* expression *on earth* at the *present* time. "The kingdom of God and His righteousness" makes provision for every detail of life (Matt. 6:31-33). It is, as Paul taught, "profitable for *all* things, holding promise *for the life that now is*, as well as for that which is to come" (I Timothy 4:8). In a famous kingdom-parable, Christ authoritatively explained that the field (the kingdom) is *the world* (Matt. 13:38). In the perspective of Scripture, God's redeemed kingdom of priests – the church (I Peter 2:9) – presently "reigns upon the earth" (Revelation 5:9). Our confidence, calling, and prospect is encapsulated in the wonderful song, that "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). The Messianic kingdom must be seen, then, as this-worldly, external, and visible – *not merely* internal to man's heart and other-worldly.