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“In this elegant volume, seven distinguished theologians wrestle with the big questions surrounding the biblical notion of kingdom—ultimately forging a path for the church where there is no inherent conflict between preaching and living, between orthodoxy and orthopraxy.”

Bruce Riley Ashford, Dean and Associate Professor of Theology and Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Provides a fresh and helpful assessment of the multifaceted meaning of the kingdom of God—from the Old Testament and the ancient covenants, to the New Testament and today’s Christians, and on to the consummation.”

Kendell Easley, Professor of Biblical Studies, Union University

“Morgan and Peterson have put together a collection that brings clarity and precision to an often blurry discussion. A biblically informed, theologically incisive, and pastorally sensitive guide to understanding the significance of the kingdom.”

Stephen T. Um, Senior Minister, Citylife Presbyterian Church, Boston, Massachusetts

Christopher W. Morgan (PhD, Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary) is professor of theology and dean of the School of Christian Ministries at California Baptist University.

Robert A. Peterson (PhD, Drew University) is professor of systematic theology at Covenant Theological Seminary. He and Chris Morgan have also edited Suffering and the Goodness of God, The Glory of God, and The Deity of Christ.
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John David Massey, Associate Professor of Missions, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The essays within provide a fresh and helpful assessment of the multifaceted meaning of the kingdom of God—from the Old Testament and the ancient covenants, to the New Testament and today’s Christians, and on to the consummation. For those in my generation captured by George Ladd’s ‘already/not yet’ understanding of God’s kingdom, this work is a noteworthy twenty-first-century expansion of how complex and important the kingdom theme is both for orthodoxy and for orthopraxy.”

Kendell Easley, Professor of Biblical Studies, Union University; author, The Illustrated Guide to Biblical History
“In this elegant volume, seven distinguished theologians wrestle with the big questions surrounding the biblical notion of kingdom—ultimately forging a path for the church where there is no inherent conflict between kingdom preaching and kingdom living, between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. As ambassadors of the king, God’s people proclaim the kingdom and embody God’s rule in every dimension of society and culture, and across the fabric of human life.”

Bruce Riley Ashford, Dean and Associate Professor of Theology and Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; editor, *Theology and Practice of Mission*

“At a time when scholars continue to wrangle over various interpretations of the kingdom and pastors seek to find clear, concrete ways to express kingdom living to their congregations, we have in this volume a foundational work that will assist scholars and pastors alike for years to come. It’s all here—the history of the debate, biblical theology, systematic theology, and very practical application. As I finished reading this book, I knew that my understanding of the kingdom was forever enlarged; perhaps more significantly, I knew that my heart would never again be satisfied with anything less than kingdom life.”

Michael Honeycutt, Associate Professor of Historical and Practical Theology, Covenant Seminary

“Chris Morgan and Robert Peterson have done a masterful job of searching out a comprehensive construct of the concept of the kingdom of God. Through world-class scholars, they have presented, as promised, “the historical, biblical, theological, and ethical” precepts of the kingdom. What a gift of understanding they have given to the body of Christ.”

Jim Parker, Associate Professor of Biblical Interpretation, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary
## Contents

List of Abbreviations .......................................................... 11

Series Preface ...................................................................... 13

Acknowledgments .................................................................... 15

Contributors ........................................................................... 17

Introduction ............................................................................ 19

1 The Kingdoms of God: The Kingdom in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives
   *Stephen J. Nichols* ......................................................... 25

2 The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament: Definitions and Story
   *Bruce K. Waltke* ............................................................. 49

3 The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament: The Covenants
   *Bruce K. Waltke* ............................................................. 73

4 The Kingdom of God in the New Testament: Matthew and Revelation
   *Robert W. Yarbrough* .................................................... 95

5 The Kingdom of God in the New Testament: Mark through the Epistles
   *Robert W. Yarbrough* .................................................... 125

6 The Kingdom, Miracles, Satan, and Demons
   *Clinton E. Arnold* .......................................................... 153

7 The Kingdom and the Church
   *Gregg R. Allison* ........................................................... 179

8 The Kingdom and Eschatology
   *Gerald Bray* .................................................................... 207

9 The Kingdom Today
   *Anthony B. Bradley* ....................................................... 229
As the series name, *Theology in Community*, indicates, theology in community aims to promote clear thinking on and godly responses to historic and contemporary theological issues. The series examines issues central to the Christian faith, including traditional topics such as sin, the atonement, the church, and heaven, but also some which are more focused or contemporary, such as suffering and the goodness of God, the glory of God, the deity of Christ, and the kingdom of God. The series strives not only to follow a sound theological method but also to display it.

Chapters addressing the Old and New Testaments on the book’s subject form the heart of each volume. Subsequent chapters synthesize the biblical teaching and link it to historical, philosophical, systematic, and pastoral concerns. Far from being mere collections of essays, the volumes are carefully crafted so that the voices of the various experts combine to proclaim a unified message.

Again, as the name suggests, theology *in community* also seeks to demonstrate that theology should be done in teams. The teachings of the Bible were forged in real-life situations by leaders in God’s covenant communities. The biblical teachings addressed concerns of real people who needed the truth to guide their lives. Theology was formulated by the church and for the church. This series seeks to recapture that biblical reality. The volumes are written by scholars, from a variety of denominational backgrounds and life experiences with academic credentials and significant expertise across the spectrum of theological disciplines, who collaborate with each other. They write from a high view of Scripture with robust evangelical conviction and in a gracious manner. They are not detached academics but are personally involved in ministry, serving as teachers, pastors, and missionaries. The contributors to these volumes stand in continuity with the historic church, care about the global church, share life together with other believers in local churches, and aim to write for the good of the church to strengthen its leaders, particularly pastors, teachers, missionaries, lay leaders, students, and professors.

For the glory of God and the good of the church,
Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson
The Kingdom and the Church

GREGG R. ALLISON

The kingdom of God is a predominant theme of Scripture,¹ and for this reason alone its relationship to the church is important and must be addressed. Add to this the fact that throughout its history, the church has entertained vastly different notions of its relationship to the kingdom of God, with the result that different ecclesiologies have arisen.² At the same time, no monolithic notion of the kingdom of God has existed or exists, further complicating the issue. Indeed, at least five elements coalesce in my attempt to describe the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God. Before discussing that multifaceted relationship, I will first articulate my understanding of the church, followed by a presentation of my understanding of the kingdom of God. Having noted five biblical themes regarding the kingdom, I will next explain the complex relationship between the church and the kingdom according to those five themes.


²Due to his misunderstanding of the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matt. 13:24–30, 34–43), Augustine equated the church with the kingdom of God (e.g., City of God, 20.9; The Letters of Petilian, the Donatist, 3.4–5). This mistaken identification became the basis for his conviction that the church is and is to be a mixed society of Christians (the wheat) and non-Christians (the weeds). Following Augustine’s lead, the Roman Catholic Church considered the church to be the kingdom of God and began to think of it as similar to earthly kingdoms. As the church became more and more a political power, the church-state model began to monopolize medieval ecclesiology. This development paved the way for military endeavors such as the Crusades; religious persecution of non-Christians and heretics by the Inquisition; political machinations such as investiture (i.e., the pope possessed authority to crown the emperor with the symbols of civil authority) and other church interference in secular matters fueled by papal claims of superiority over the state. For example, Boniface VIII’s startling claim: “And we learn from the words of the Gospel that in this church and in her power are two swords, the spiritual and the temporal. For when the apostles said, ‘Behold, here’—that is, in the church, because it was
specifically: (1) the church and the kingdom as God’s universal rule and eternal dominion, (2) the church and the kingdom as Israel, (3) the church and the kingdom as belonging to the Son of Man/Davidic King, (4) the church and the kingdom as an inaugurated reality, and (5) the church and the kingdom as an eschatological reality. Finally, I will offer a few words of encouragement and exhortation regarding how the church should live in light of its complex relationship to the kingdom of God.

The Identity of the Church

The church is the people of God who have been saved through repentance and faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ (e.g., Acts 2:22–41) and incorporated into his body through baptism with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:15–17; 1 Cor. 12:12–13). As this statement emphasizes, the church is the people of God or, in the words of the Apostles’ Creed, “the communion of saints.” In contrast with some common notions today, the church is not a building (the red-brick, colonial-style building with white pillars and a steeple just a few blocks down from where we live), a denominational tag (e.g., the Presbyterian Church, USA), a national or state church (e.g., the Lutheran Church of Sweden), avatars worshiping together in the virtual world of Second Life, or the Catholic Church (with its claim that “the one Church of Christ . . . subsists in the Catholic Church”). Rather, the church is people; specifically, the church is the new-covenant people of God. Though the people of God have existed from the beginning of the human
race (one thinks especially of the people of Israel who lived under the old covenant), the church (adhering to the new covenant) did not exist prior to the first coming of Jesus Christ. He is the Redeemer who accomplished salvation through his atoning death and resurrection for the people of God who compose the church. It is through the gospel, and a response to it of repentance from sin and faith in Christ, that Christians have been saved (and by this term I mean all aspects of the mighty work of God that are commonly regarded as encompassing salvation, including election, effective calling, regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification). An additional aspect of the salvific work of God—one that is often overlooked but relates directly to the identity of the members of the church—is the incorporation of Christians into the body of Christ as he baptizes them with the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, all who are “in Christ” are de facto “in the church” and compose its members.

The church consists of two interrelated elements, commonly referred to as the “universal” church and “local” churches. The universal church is the company of all Christians stretching from its inception (accomplished by the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, and created by the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost) to its terminal point, Christ’s second coming at the end of this present age (or, specifically, the rapture of the church prior to his return). It incorporates both the deceased believers who are currently in the presence of Christ in heaven (Heb. 12:23) and the living believers scattered throughout the world. Whereas the former aspect is gathered together as the “heavenly” church, the latter aspect does not assemble in only one particular place, does not possess a single specific structure or organization, does not have one particular set of human leaders, and does not have a specific space-time address (e.g., the Church of God in Corinth; Sojourn Community Church). These intangibles do not render the universal church any less real, however, as the next point demonstrates.

7Thus, we can speak of the one people of God consisting of different and distinguishable expressions, e.g., the old-covenant people of Israel, and the new-covenant people of the church.
8In using the word terminal, I am not indicating that the people who now compose the church will cease to exist at the second coming of Christ, only that the current earthly manifestation of the church in its “already/not yet” reality will come to a conclusion. Moreover, in affirming the rapture of the church, I am not committing myself necessarily to any of the specific end-times views, as amillennialists, post-millennialists, historic premillennialists, and dispensational premillennialists all agree (based on 1 Thess. 4:13–18) that at the second coming, the dead in Christ and believers alive at the moment “will be caught up (rapture) together . . . to meet the Lord in the air.”
9According to Hodge, “The ‘church’ is the company of the redeemed here and in heaven, which constitutes one body.” Charles Hodge, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians (1856; repr. Charleston, SC: Bibliobazaar, 2008), 136.
This universal church (at least its living members) is manifested (by Christ, its head, and the Spirit) and manifests itself (through Christians associating themselves with one another; Heb. 10:24–25) in local churches,\(^{10}\) characterized by seven attributes.\(^{11}\) Local churches are: (1) doxological, or oriented to the glory of God (Eph. 3:20–21); (2) logos-centric, or centered on the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:18–19; Eph. 1:22; 2:20), and the inspired Word of God, Scripture (e.g., Acts 2:42; 6:2); (3) pneumatodynamic, or created, gathered, gifted, and empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–5; 20:28; Eph. 4:3; 1 Cor. 12:7, 11); (4) covenantal, or gathered as members in new-covenant relationship with God and in covenantal relationship with each other (e.g., Eph. 4:25–32); (5) confessional, or united by both personal confession of faith in Christ (Rom. 10:8–13) and common confession of the Christian faith (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:15–16); (6) missional, or identified as the body of divinely called and divinely sent ministers to proclaim the gospel and advance the kingdom of God (John 20:19–23); and (7) spatio-temporal-eschatological, or assembled as a historical reality (located in space and time; e.g., 1 Cor. 1:2; Rev. 2:5) and possessing a certain hope and clear destiny while they live the strangeness of ecclesial existence in the here-and-now (1 Pet. 2:11; Eph. 4:13–16).

Local churches are led by qualified and publicly recognized men who are called pastors or elders (as used in the New Testament, two other terms—“bishops” and “overseers”—are other interchangeable terms) who have the responsibilities of teaching sound doctrine (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17), governing (under the headship of Christ; Eph. 1:22; 1 Tim. 3:4–5), praying (including for the sick; James 5:13–16), and shepherding (leading through exemplary lifestyles; 1 Pet. 5:1–3). These assemblies are also served by deacons, qualified and publicly recognized persons who serve Jesus Christ in the many church ministries (1 Tim. 3:8–13; Rom. 16:1–2).

Because of divine grace and provision, local churches possess both purity and unity; because of sin, however, they must also pursue greater purity and maintain unity through both divine aid and Spirit-empowered human

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\(^{10}\)This affirmation does not mean that all redeemed people join themselves to a local congregation. For various reasons—e.g., disobedience, laziness, sickness, incarceration, lack of accessibility, persecution—some do not participate in a local church, and Christians who have come under church discipline are excommunicated, or expelled, from their church. Neither does the affirmation mean that local churches are composed solely of redeemed people. Non-Christians who are being moved by God toward salvation but who are not yet converted may participate in a church community, while others, believing themselves to be genuine Christians, may be members of a local church.

\(^{11}\)Because the universal church becomes manifested in local churches that possess these seven characteristics, it should come as no surprise that it is characterized by many of these same attributes.
effort (Eph. 4:1–6, 13–16). When their members persist in sin, churches exercise discipline for the purposes of restoring erring members and rectifying entrenched sinful situations, containing such sin-saturated realities, and preserving the honor of Christ and their own reputation (Matt. 20:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Thess. 3:6–15). Churches also develop strong connections with other local churches for the purposes of cooperative high-impact ministry, the sharing of resources, mutual accountability, and the like (e.g., Acts 15; 2 Corinthians 8–9).

In terms of their ministry and mission, local churches regularly gather to worship the triune God, proclaim his Word through the preaching of Scripture, celebrate the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, engage non-Christians with the gospel, exercise spiritual gifts for the building up their members, disciple those members through education and sharing in community life, care for people through prayer and giving, stand for and against the world by helping the poor and marginalized through holistic ministries, and denounce the evils wrought by sin.

The Identity of the Kingdom of God

As any kingdom is ruled by a king, in the matter before us, “God is the King of all the earth” (Ps. 47:7), the “Most High” who “rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will” (Dan. 4:25; cf. Ps. 22:28). His sovereignty is such that “the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will” (Prov. 21:1), so that it may be said that “he removes kings and sets up kings” (Dan. 2:21). This divine reign is not confined to earth and its citizens: God is also ruler of the angelic domain: “All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he [the Most High] does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him 'What have you done?'” (Dan. 4:35; cf. Ps. 135:6). As such, universality and eternity apply to God's sovereign rulership: “his kingdom rules over all” (Ps. 103:19) and is “an everlasting kingdom” (145:13). This aspect of the kingdom focuses on God's reign or rule over all the created order—he is the King who exercises absolute sovereignty over his kingdom, which consists of everything he has brought into and keeps in existence.

Of particular interest to us is the kingdom of humanity created and ruled over by him. In one sense, God is the sovereign Lord of all the peoples of the world (Acts 17:25–26). Indeed, he has created all human beings in his image and given to them the responsibility and ability (though diminished because of the fall) to be “fruitful and multiply and fill the earth
and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28). Consequently, all people exist as vice-regents of and under the sovereign King.

At the same time, out of all the nations of the world, this sovereign King chose Israel to be the kingdom of his covenant people; thus, it was said of the Israelites, “The Lord their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them” (Num. 23:21). This kingdom of Israel was first a theocracy ruled by God himself, then later led by human kings, first as a united kingdom (under Saul, David, and Solomon) and then as the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Why were these people recipients of God’s particular attention? The reason certainly did not lie with the natural greatness of these—rather than of other—people, as the Lord informs them: “It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples” (Deut. 7:7). Rather, divine election was the reason—the sovereign Lord chose Israel to be his particular people as an expression of his unconditional grace and kindness. As a result, God spoke of the people of Israel as “my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5–6). Ultimately, the sovereign plan was that the election of Israel would not only bring salvation to this people but eventually result in the blessing of the entire world (Gen. 12:1–3; Isa. 45:21–22).

While this theocratic/monarchical kingdom experienced its many ebbs and flows, the Old Testament prophets wrote about the anticipation of a glorious future. In part, this hope had specific reference to Israel, in terms of a restoration of its people to the land of promise and abundant blessing (e.g., Ezekiel 36–37). Still, this future, glorious kingdom of God was associated with a coming Davidic king (2 Samuel 7; Ps. 89:27; Mark 11:10) and “one like a son of man” who would have a worldwide impact: “And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:14). Indeed, this Son of Man/Davidic King would have the responsibility of bringing light to “the people who walked in darkness” (Isa. 9:2–7), to “stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall

129Resistence to the institution of the monarchy in Israel . . . was based on the conviction that God should be the sole ruler of his people (Judg. 8:23).” Charles H. H. Scobie, The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 106.
the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious” (11:10)—to be “as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations” (42:6). By means of this coming King, the kingdom of God would be extended to all the peoples of the world, in fulfillment of the original vision. Ultimately, all the kingdoms of this world would be destroyed, “And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him” (Dan. 7:27). The Old Testament prophetic hope included a particular emphasis on the people of Israel, yet extended beyond to encompass a vision for an eternal kingdom to be established for the King and all of his subjects.

Jesus of Nazareth inaugurated the fulfillment of this Old Testament vision, being identified as both the son/descendant of David (Matt. 1:1; Luke 1:32; Rom. 1:3) and the Son of Man (Luke 19:10; Matt. 26:64). In particular, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45), which is Jesus’ own self-identification with the Son of Man figure of the Old Testament and his advancement of that image to include the accomplishment of salvation. Indeed, a conjunction between the gospel and the kingdom was central to the mission of Jesus who, at the outset of his ministry, “came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’” (1:14–15). This ministry of proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom was accompanied by Jesus’ “healing every disease and every affliction among the people” (Matt. 4:23; 9:35). Because at least some of these physical ailments were the result of demonic activity, Jesus also engaged in exorcisms. When he healed “a demon-oppressed man who was blind and mute,” Jesus used that occasion to draw attention to the power of the Holy Spirit at work through him: “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (12:22, 28). Thus, the miraculous signs and Spirit-empowered exorcisms underscored Jesus’ inauguration of the kingdom of God. While he healed a great number of people, and many more people sought him out for his curative touch and even tried to detain him from leaving them, Jesus did not allow himself to be sidetracked by less important ventures: “‘I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.’ And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea” (Luke 4:42–44).
The preaching of the gospel of the kingdom of God was at the core of the earthly mission of Jesus.

Thus far, our discussion has focused on the present reality of the kingdom in the ministry of Jesus. He again underscored this “already” aspect in an encounter with the religious leaders of his day: “Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he [Jesus] answered them, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you’” (17:20–21). But there was another side of this kingdom reality.

An eschatological aspect balances this realized aspect of the kingdom, making the kingdom inaugurated but incomplete, here but not here, “already” but “not yet.” Indeed, according to Jesus, the kingdom he ushers in begins small, “like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches” (Matt. 13:31–32; cf. 33–34).13 As it expands, however, the kingdom is countered by another domain.

As for the kingdom, parabolically, the sower sows good seed on good soil that sprouts and produces good grain. In other words, the “children of the kingdom” hear the word of the kingdom, understand it, and bear fruit; they are the result of Jesus’ work in the world. As for the counter domain, parabolically, the sower sows good seed on bad soil that fails to develop fully. Alternatively, an enemy sows weeds among the wheat such that in the midst of the good grain, weeds appear also. In other words, the “sons of the evil one” hear the word of the kingdom but either fail to understand it or, though understanding it, do not persist so as to bear fruit. Alternatively, they are the weeds among the wheat; they are the result of Satan’s work in the world. Accordingly, the world, which is ultimately God’s kingdom, is populated by two diverse groups of citizens, two opposing domains: the “children of the kingdom” and the “sons of the evil one.” This world/kingdom will encompass these two opposing citizenries until the end. Parabolically, at harvest time the reapers will first gather the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned, then gather the wheat into the sower’s barn. In other words, at the close of the age, Jesus “will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin

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13This and other similar parables do not seem to emphasize the speed of the growth of the kingdom but the amazing contrast between the size of the kingdom at its inauguration and at its consummation.
and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt. 13:1–9, 18–23, 24–30, 36–43). To them, Jesus the King will say, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (25:34). As history progresses, God’s kingdom-as-the-world moves patiently yet resolutely toward the actualization of this eschatological vision of the demise of all opposition and the exaltation of its rightful citizens.

In summary, the kingdom of God includes: (1) the universal rule and complete reign of the sovereign King over everything he has created and sustains in existence; (2) the people of Israel, graciously chosen from among all the peoples of the world to be God’s covenant kingdom people; (3) an anticipated future vision associated with a Davidic King and the Son of Man; (4) an inaugurated reality, fulfilled “already” in Jesus Christ who preached the gospel of the kingdom of God, which message gives rise to and results in children of the kingdom and citizens of opposition; and (5) a hope for the “not yet” aspects of the kingdom reality in Jesus to be completed soon. Accordingly, the church relates to the kingdom of God according to these five themes, all of which will be explored in the following discussion.

The Church and the Kingdom as God’s Universal Rule and Eternal Dominion

Because of its multifaceted nature, the kingdom of God enjoys a complex relationship to the church. In one sense, the church owes its existence to the kingdom, which is intended as God’s universal rule and eternal dominion. The sovereign king reigning over everything purposed, brought forth, and established the church as part of his reign (Eph. 1:11). The church, then, is one reality that exists and develops under the exhaustive sovereignty of God over all things. It takes its place with the angelic hosts, the subkingdoms appointed by God (Rom. 13:1–7), all humanity, and the entirety of the created order as constitutive elements of the kingdom rule of God. Ladd explains this reality of the church as the community of the kingdom of God:

The Kingdom is primarily the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God, and, derivatively, the sphere in which the rule is experienced. In biblical idiom, the Kingdom is not identified with its subjects. They are the
people of God’s rule who enter it, live under it, and are governed by it. The church is the community of the Kingdom but never the Kingdom itself. Jesus’ disciples belong to the Kingdom as the Kingdom belongs to them; but they are not the Kingdom. The Kingdom is the rule of God; the church is a society of men.\footnote{George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 111.}

Without equating or fusing the two realities, we may affirm that the church is the community of citizens of the kingdom of God.\footnote{As Moltmann explains the kingdom and its relationship to the church: “The church in the power of the Spirit is not yet the kingdom of God, but it is its anticipation in history. Christianity is not yet the new creation, but it is the working of the Spirit of the new creation. Christianity is not yet the new mankind but it is its vanguard, in resistance to deadly introversion and in self-giving and representation for man’s future. . . . In this sense the church of Jesus Christ is the people of the kingdom of God.” Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margeret Kohl (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 196.}

This identity is most thoroughly affirmed by Jesus in what certainly is the *locus classicus* in historical and contemporary discussions of the church:

Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 16:16–19)

In speaking with his disciples, Jesus indicates that he is about to establish a new entity, different from yet with some similarities to the *qahal* featured in Israel in earlier days. In the Old Testament, *qahal* referred to the congregation of Israel assembled together under Yahweh (Num. 16:3) to hear and respond to (Neh. 13:1–3) his authoritative and revealed word (Deut. 31:30).\footnote{We see this response specifically in the people assenting to the covenant with Yahweh (Deut. 5:27) or their renewing of the covenant (Josh. 8:30–35).} Jesus will institute a new assembly of his people gathered under him—*μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν* (*mou tēn ekklēsian*), “my church,” he calls it—involving the Twelve and built on Peter and his authoritative word—the confession of faith of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth as “Christ, the Son of the living God,” that was revealed to him by the Father (Matt. 16:16–17).\footnote{As Herman Bavinck explained with regard to Jesus’ reference to the “church” in Matt. 16:18 and 18:17, “He is therefore still employing it in a very general sense. He does not say whether that *lhq’* [*qahal*], *ekklēsia*, will be local or spread itself out over the whole earth. The later distinction between the local church and the universal church cannot yet be found here. Instead, Jesus here states very generally that he will build his ekklēsia” Herman Bavinck, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, vol. 4 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John}
Specifically, the church is the instrument through which entrance into the kingdom is granted, as the church has been entrusted with and employs “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (v. 19). These keys have to do with the gospel and people’s response to it. Those who repent of sin and embrace Jesus Christ by faith are “loosed” from their sin, death and condemnation, domination by the world, and enslavement to the Evil One. Oppositely, those who refuse to heed the good news are “bound” in that persistent hellish nightmare.

Accordingly, those who have been loosed from sin are incorporated into the church as citizens of the kingdom of God. “The implication is inescapable that, in the establishment of the church, there was to be a manifestation of the kingdom or rule of God.” Though the King and his reign/subjects will be fiercely challenged—by the kingdom-opposing world, Satan, the sons of the Evil One (Matt. 12:22–37; 13:3–7, 18–22)—all such attempts to depose him and destroy his church will ultimately fail; “the gates of hell” or death will not prevail against the church. Though indestructible, the church as the display of the kingdom progresses through trial and temptation, suffering and persecution, as it is built by Christ himself.

For such a task of exercising the keys of the kingdom and offering entrance into the kingdom, Jesus himself prepared his disciples. Such activity was inaugurated while Jesus was still with them: “And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:1–2). After Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the apostles were empowered and emboldened to continue this proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom. They were joined by others: Philip “preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 8:12), resulting in the conversion of a large number of Samaritans. A late addition to the apostolic group—the apostle Paul—engaged in several missionary journeys, bringing the good news to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews. Appropriately, Luke “closes” his book of Acts with Paul’s “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:3–31; cf. 14:21–23; 19:8; 20:25).

Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 279. While concurring with Bavinck, I would add that Jesus’ reference to the “church” in Matt. 16:18 certainly includes its concretization in specific local churches. This idea comes out even more strongly in 18:17, in which Jesus prescribes the steps of discipline that are to be carried out in a specific church racked by the problem of sin among its members.

This preaching of the gospel of the kingdom demands to be appropriated, and this reception takes place through a combination of divine and human actions. On the one hand, Jesus instructed Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). This regenerative action is completely the work of God apart from any human cooperation. As the Holy Spirit brings about the new birth, or the impartation of new spiritual life, regenerated people become citizens of the kingdom of God. On the other hand, Jesus called people to repentance and faith (Mark 1:15), warning that “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Luke 18:17). Indeed, acquisition of the kingdom, which “is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up,” demands that “he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matt. 13:44; cf. 45–46). Through both divine and human actions, the kingdom of God opens for sinful human beings to enter.

The church is the key instrument in announcing the good news, and through its communication of the gospel new citizens enter the kingdom of God. Thus, the church, as the community of the kingdom, provides entrance into the kingdom through its untiring preaching of the gospel, and its newly born citizens live as kingdom people under the sovereignty of the king. Indeed, the church gives thanks to and honors its king. Specifically, as “heirs of the kingdom, which he [God] has promised to those who love him” (James 2:5), Christians give thanks to the Father, knowing “he has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13–14).

The Church and the Kingdom as Israel
A second important theme of the kingdom in Scripture is the Jewish people or the nation of Israel as the kingdom of God. This emphasis raises the question of the relationship between the church and Israel. For most of the church’s history, the relationship was regarded as one of continuity and substitution. In terms of continuity, the people of Israel under the old covenant and Christians of the new covenant are both part of the people of God, joined together under the one covenant of grace. According to this continuity position, “the term ‘the church’ is used to apply to all those whom Christ died to redeem, all those who are saved by the death of Christ. But that must include all true believers for all time, both believers in the New Testament age and believers in the Old Testament age as
specifically, Berkhof identifies the church in the patriarchal period with “the pious households, where the fathers served as priests. . . . At the time of the flood the Church was saved in the family of Noah, and continued particularly in the line of Shem.” Then, “the families of the patriarch were the real repositories of the true faith,” constituting the church. In the period of Moses, Berkhof maintains:

After the exodus the people of Israel were not only organized into a nation, but were also constituted the Church of God. They were enriched with institutions in which not only family devotion or tribal faith but the religion of the nation could find expression. The Church did not yet obtain an independent organization, but had its institutional existence in the national life of Israel.

As for what the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ brings, Berkhof offers: “The New Testament Church is essentially one with the Church of the old dispensation. As far as their essential nature is concerned, they both consist of true believers, and of true believers only. And in their external organization both represent a mixture of good and evil.”

There is essential continuity between the church and Israel.

In terms of substitution, the church has replaced Israel such that the Jews as a national people hold no special place in the salvific work of God now or in the future. Because of their rejection of Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, the Jews have forfeited the promises of blessing that are replete throughout the Old Testament. Other proponents of the continuity view insist that those promises are now being spiritually fulfilled in the church. In either case, there is no residual hope for a national restoration of the Jews to the Promised Land or a fresh outpouring of salvation upon the people of Israel in the future. Some who hold this view maintain that while Scripture makes no promises of salvation to national Israel, it does make them to ethnic Israel (cf. Rom. 11:25–32) and that these will be fulfilled in the church age and/or at the second coming.

A key passage in support of the continuity view, along with others to which its proponents appeal, is Galatians 6:16: “And as for all who walk

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20Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, 4th rev. and enlarged ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 570–71. Berkhof notes that his view is in keeping with the historic Reformed position, citing the Belgic Confession (art. 27) and the Heidelberg Catechism (21) as illustrations.
21E.g., Anthony A. Hoekema, The Bible and the Future (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 139–47. See also Grudem, Systematic Theology, 861; cf. 1009, 1104.
by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” The rule to which Paul refers is that articulated in the preceding verse: the key is not circumcision nor uncircumcision, but “a new creation” (v. 15) through the cross of Jesus Christ. For all who keep in step with this rule, the apostle prays divine peace and mercy.

For our discussion, the important question focuses on the referent of the expression “the Israel of God.” Scholars are divided on the answer. Some consider the referent to be Jewish believers in Jesus the Messiah; accordingly, Paul prays a special blessing on this particular Jewish-Christian part of the church. This interpretation is highly unlikely, however, for it would cut across the grain of the entire letter and its theme of Jews and Gentiles together in Christ (e.g., Gal. 3:26–29). Moreover, it would contradict Paul’s belittling of circumcision and uncircumcision (e.g., 5:6), the very point that has led him to frame the rule of Galatians 6:15. “Having just made an all-inclusive statement in verse 15, is it not inconceivable that Paul suddenly would distinguish between two kinds of Christians, one Gentile, the other Jewish?”

Other scholars, including the editors of this volume, understand the referent to be the church—mostly Gentiles, with a remnant of Jews—that now constitutes “the new people of God—the new and true Israel.” They hold the referent of the expression “all who walk by this rule” and the referent of the expression “the Israel of God” to be equivalent. Furthermore, these interpreters point to Paul’s description of all Christ’s followers—including those from a Gentile background—as “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29; cf. 3:9, 14). Thus they contend that the apostle prays for peace and mercy to be upon the church, which is the “Israel of God”:

Such an interpretation fits with the remainder of the letter, for believers in Christ are the true sons of Abraham. But if they are Abraham’s children and belong to his family, then they belong to the Israel of God. It would be highly confusing to the Galatians, after arguing for the equality of Jew and Gentile in Christ (3:28) and after emphasizing that believers are Abraham’s children, for Paul to argue in the conclusion that only Jews who believe in Jesus belong to the Israel of God. By doing so a wedge would be introduced between Jews and Gentiles at the end of the letter.

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23Tom Schreiner, personal correspondence with the author.
letter, suggesting that they are not part of the true Israel. Such a wedge would play into the hands of the opponents who would argue that to be part of the true Israel one must be circumcised. Instead, Paul confirms one of the major themes of the letter. All believers in Christ are part of the true Israel, part of God’s Israel.24

This interpretation, which is a plausible understanding, equates the church with the new Israel. If this identification is true, it is a direct affirmation of the continuity between the church and Israel.

A third interpretation, which disagrees with the first two “continuity” understandings, takes the referent to be ethnic Israel. In this case, as he nears the end of his letter to the Galatians, Paul is aware that he has been highly critical of his own people the Jews—“the Israel of God.” He has magnified his ministry to the Gentiles (2:7–9), recounted his rebuke of Peter and other Jewish believers for their hypocrisy (1:13–16; 2:11–14), clarified the role of the Mosaic law (3:15–25), underscored the barrenness of the Jews according to the flesh (4:21–31), noted Jewish persecution of the church (4:29), and exposed the unimportance of circumcision (5:2–12; 6:11–15). Such strong criticism, he feared, could be misunderstood to be a scathing indictment of the Jewish people—not at all what Paul intended to communicate. Appropriately, he prays for divine blessing both for the church—“all who walk by this rule”—as well as for “the Israel of God.” This plausible interpretation supports the discontinuity position emphasizing the distinction between the church and Israel.

Support for this interpretation includes New Testament and Pauline usage of the term “Israel.” In almost all cases, the term refers to ethnic Israel; indeed, if it were the case that “the Israel of God” refers to the church, it would be the only instance in all of Scripture.25 Also, as highly unlikely as it is that Paul would single out Jewish believers in the church for special blessing (an objection to the first interpretation), it is equally unlikely that he would call the church with its large Gentile majority “the Israel of God.” His point has been to deflate the importance of Jewish identity, so why would he suddenly refer to the church with an expression with such little weight? If this interpretation is correct, then Galatians 6:16 is not a passage in support of the identity between the church and Israel. The case for continuity between the church and Israel in the people

of God and the replacement of the latter by the former, though the traditional perspective of the church, may not rely on this verse, though of course it appeals to others.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, this prevailing, historic view was challenged by the doctrine of the church articulated by dispensational theology. Two contributors to this development were J. N. Darby and Lewis Sperry Chafer. Darby insisted on a complete discontinuity between the remnant of the Jewish people and the church—each has its own history, destiny, and hope. Concerning the church, Darby believed that it was a mystery that was not revealed until the apostle Paul wrote his letters and concluded that the doctrine of the church “was thus wholly unknown to the saints of the Old Testament.” More specifically, the entire doctrine of the church was communicated by the apostle Paul—it is found nowhere else, even in the New Testament.

According to Lewis Sperry Chafer, some of the key differences between the Jewish people and the church include the permanent indwelling of Christians by the Holy Spirit, the baptism of the Holy Spirit for Christians, earthly promises to Israel versus heavenly promises to the church, law as the rule of life for the Jews versus grace for Christians, and incorporation into the body of Christ for Christians. Furthermore, Chafer argued that the church began at Pentecost and did not exist for the old-covenant people of God because its existence was dependent on the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit to regenerate, baptize, and seal people as part of the church. This church, being dominated by grace and having no connection whatsoever to law, finds its instructions for doctrine, worship, ministry, ordinances, and government solely in (parts of) the New Testament, not at all in the Old Testament. Indeed, for Chafer, the church is an “intercalation” or parenthesis interjected into the plan of God for his people, the Jews: “The present age of the church is an intercalation into the revealed calendar or program of God as that program was foreseen by the prophets of old.”

27Ibid. Darby listed Rom. 16:25–26; Eph. 3:4–5, 9; and Col. 1:24 in support.
28Ibid., 150–51.
30Ibid., 45–46.
31Ibid., 16, 19, 28, 29.
32Ibid., 41.
the rapture of the church just prior to the seven years of the great tribulation leading up to the second coming of Christ—God will once again turn to his people the Jews and renew his saving work toward them.

Since the formulation of this classical dispensational ecclesiology, a new expression of this theology has challenged some of its key tenets. This so-called progressive dispensationalism\(^{33}\) denies that the church is a parenthesis in the divine program but has always been an essential feature of God’s plan to extend his salvation to all people, both Jews and Gentiles. Moreover, progressive dispensationalism does not distinguish between the church and Israel in terms of spiritual and heavenly blessings for the former and physical and earthly blessings for the latter. Rather, both in their own ways participate in the kingdom of God and its multifold blessings. Furthermore, the strict dichotomy between the law for Israel and grace for the church is rejected as utterly untenable.

Still, for progressive dispensationalism, discontinuity between the church and Israel can be clearly seen in certain experiences of salvation—the baptism of the Holy Spirit who permanently indwells Christians and endows them with spiritual gifts, for example.\(^{34}\) At the same time, this discontinuity is not absolute, as seen in the following: The church is the beneficiary of both the new covenant, which was prophesied for Israel and Judah (Jer. 31:31–34, cited in Heb. 8:6–13), and the promise of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit for Judah (Joel 2:28–29, cited in Acts 2:17–21). In addition, certain terms used for the Jewish people—the “offspring” or “sons” of Abraham (Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:7, 29), “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9), for example—are applied to the church. And ultimately, the church and Israel are part of the one people of God, as vividly portrayed by Paul’s metaphor of the olive tree (Rom. 11:13–24).\(^{35}\) But the dissimilarities are significant enough so as to maintain the distinction between the church and Israel. Progressive dispensationalism also holds to a future fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies directed at national Israel, including the salvation of many Jewish people and restoration to the land of Israel.

\(^{33}\)Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992); idem., Progressive Dispensationalism (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1993); Robert L. Saucy, The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993).

\(^{34}\)The editors hold to more continuity in salvation than is reflected in these statements.

\(^{35}\)In this Pauline image, the natural branches represent the Jewish people and the wild olive shoots now grafted into the tree represent the Gentiles who have embraced Jesus Christ so as to become the church. Both discontinuity—the natural branches have been broken off but will be grafted in again, while the wild olive shoots are currently grafted into the root—and continuity—the two types of branches are part of the one cultivated olive tree—are emphasized in this image. But plainly the emphasis is on continuity.
What is the import of this discussion for the relationship of the church and the kingdom of God? Jesus’ striking words, offered at the conclusion of his parable of the tenants (Matt. 21:33–41), shape my perspective. Severely rebuking the Jewish leaders of his day,

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures:

‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is marvelous in our eyes’?

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.”
(Matt. 21:42–43)

Jesus indicated a change in the administration of the kingdom of God. Foretelling the ultimate rejection of himself as the promised Davidic King/Son of Man by his own people, and highlighting that rejection as the reason for the change, Jesus promised that he would wrench the administration of the kingdom of God from its current—and divinely appointed—Jewish administrators and hand it over to “a people” (ἔθνος, ethnos, the common Greek word for Gentiles) who would live by kingdom values and engage in kingdom works. This “people” would not be the Gentiles per se, but the church that would be composed mostly of Gentiles and a remnant of Jews. Keeping in mind what I wrote previously, this conferring of the kingdom to the church results in their association, with the church as the community and administrator of the kingdom of God.

The Church and the Kingdom as Belonging to the Son of Man/Davidic King
A third major theme, noteworthy especially among Old Testament prophets, was an anticipation of a future, glorious kingdom of God belonging to a coming Son of Man/Davidic King. As seen immediately above, the Jewish rejection of Jesus as the fulfillment of this prophetic hope for Israel resulted in the initial fulfillment of the same prophetic hope expanded to include “the people who walked in darkness” (Isa. 9:2–7), as the Son of Man/Davidic King would be “a light for the nations” (42:6). Specifically, at the Jerusalem Council—which was convened to investigate a claim by unendorsed Judaizers that Gentiles embracing Jesus must also be “cir-
cumcised according to the custom of Moses” and “keep the law of Moses” in order to be saved (Acts 15:1, 5)—James explains that the nascent movement of Gentiles’ turning to Jesus and entering the church is the beginning fulfillment of Amos’s prophetic vision (vv. 16–17, citing Amos 9:11, 12):

After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;
I will rebuild its ruins,
and I will restore it,
that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,
says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.

Thus the early church associated the inclusion of the Gentiles in the divine plan of redemption through the church with a restored house of David.

Similarly, Paul noted “that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy” (Rom. 15:8). After listing several Old Testament passages that confirm this divine intention to include the Gentiles in redemption (vv. 9–11, citing 2 Sam. 22:50; Deut. 32:43; and Ps. 117:1), the apostle cites the prophet Isaiah: “the root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope” (Rom. 15:12, citing Isa. 11:10). Again, language about Davidic kingship—“the root of Jesse” (cf. “the stump of Jesse;” Isa. 11:1)—is related to the inclusion of the Gentiles in the divine plan of redemption through the church.

Following the apostle Paul’s teaching, this increasingly Gentile church professed “Jesus is Lord” not only as recognition of the identity of their sovereign King, but as subversion of all other claimants to ultimate allegiance. The acknowledgment of King Jesus entailed the renunciation of all other so-called kings, whether earthly Caesars ruling from Rome or rulers and authorities and powers and dominions threatening human beings from the heavenly places. Such subversion was demanded because through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, God had “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, but triumphing over them in him” (Col. 2:15) and established Jesus “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Eph. 1:21). The christological hymn in Paul’s letter to the Philippians pays tribute to the ultimate demise of all other kings, rulers, authorities, and powers—be
they earthly or heavenly—as they acknowledge the true Lord: “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9–11).

The Church and the Kingdom as an Inaugurated Reality

Accordingly, and as a fourth theme, the church relates to the kingdom of God as an inaugurated reality. As noted above, the church corresponds to one of the two citizenries that encompass God’s kingdom-as-the-world, the “children of the kingdom.”

Specifically, this relationship means that the church is missional, or identified as the body of divinely called and divinely sent ministers to proclaim the gospel and advance the kingdom of God. Such is the crux of Jesus’ affirmation: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. . . . If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (John 20:21, 23). That is, the missio Dei—the mission of God—with which the Son was commissioned by the Father and which was accomplished by the Son through his sacrificial death for all humanity. This then becomes the same mission with which the Son commissions his disciples—the church announces the salvation accomplished by the Son. Hence, the missional church obeys Jesus’ commission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18–20). And the missional church is well prepared for the missio Dei: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Accordingly, the missional church is expansive (extending from its beginning in Jerusalem to church planting endeavors around the globe

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36In exalting Christ, Paul’s language is clearly taken from Isa. 45:23, whose context is an affirmation that God alone is God and there is no other (Isa. 45:14, 18, 21, 22). N. T. Wright develops this aspect of the confession “Jesus is Lord” from Phil. 2:5–11: “Paul is not simply articulating a breathtaking vision of who Jesus is, and indeed of who God is. He is also, quite directly and explicitly, subverting the claims of the other great would-be lord of his day, namely Caesar.” N. T. Wright, What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity? (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 56–57. The Roman Empire’s persecution of the early church was often motivated by its understanding that Christians were atheists, that is, they refused to acknowledge that “Caesar is Lord.” Certainly, this refusal grew out of the subversion inherent in their confession that “Jesus is Lord.”
today), contextually sensitive (compare three Lukan narratives—Acts 2:14–41; 14:8–18; and 17:16–34—to gain a strong sense of this emphasis), and (potentially) catholic, which is the goal of the missional church in terms of its extension—complete universality. As Moltmann notes, this universality flows from the lordship of Christ: “The catholicity of the church is not initially her spatial extent or the fact that she is in principle open to the world; it is the limitless lordship of Christ, to whom ‘all authority is given in heaven and on earth.’ Where, and so far as, Christ rules, there, consequently, the church is to be found. She acquires her openness to the world in the breadth of his rule.” Indeed, the missional church presses on into all lands, anticipating the realization of this heavenly worship song directed to the glory of the bloodied Lamb of God: “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:9–10). These “children of the kingdom” are the fruit of the missional church living the reality of the inaugurated kingdom of God.

Moreover, the church lives this inaugurated reality by pressing on toward kingdom maturity. As it is characterized by certain qualities, the church works hard to develop them more fully, supplementing “faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:5–8, 11). Being in the world and thus in close quarters with “the sons of the evil one” who are enemies of Christ afflicting his followers, the church experiences suffering as it waits for the realization of the kingdom (2 Thess. 1:5). Indeed, the church acknowledges that, in reference to Christ, it “should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil. 1:29). As Paul announced, “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Accordingly, the church is in this world and for this world, but it is not of this world,

37 According to the Second Helvetic Confession (17): “We, therefore, call this Church catholic because it is universal, scattered through all parts of the world, and extended unto all times, and is not limited to any times or places.”

reflecting Jesus’ reply to Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world” (John 18:36). So the church as the community of the kingdom renounces the wisdom of the world (1 Cor. 1:18–2:5) and fleshly warfare (2 Cor. 10:1–6) while it trusts in the power of God and obeys his kingdom’s values.

Additionally, the church lives the reality of the inaugurated kingdom by seeking to advance that kingdom wherever the church’s members—the citizens of the kingdom—live, work, and play: in neighborhoods, workplaces, governmental agencies, financial establishments, sports programs, and other institutions and structures. Specifically, the church takes seriously the so-called “cultural mandate” (Gen. 1:28), or the commission enjoined upon all human beings to engage in civilization-building as vice-regents of the King. Accordingly, the church prepares redeemed “civilian citizens” to participate well in human endeavors such as politics, business, the arts, medicine and health care, athletics, science and technology, farming, and economics.39

Furthermore, because this world is fallen and thus sin-stained and susceptible to disasters of all kinds (human evil, systemic evil, natural evil, Satanic and demonic evil), civilization-building encounters severe obstacles and is in need of other structures that intervene to minimize or relieve misery, poverty, marginalization, injustice, crime, financial failure, and the like. The church, a place of mercy and justice, challenges its members to bear the responsibility to build the “city of man” and overcome its dark side. As they endeavor to provide such tangible aid for others, they realize that their brothers and sisters according to creation are being helped—and this is pleasing to the Lord who has created all human beings equally in his image.40 In these and many other ways, the church is for the world and against (the sinful corruption of) the world.41

39 For an excellent presentation of what the political focus entails, see Wayne Grudem, Politics—According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

40 Tragically, this notion of the brotherhood (and sisterhood) of all humanity was co-opted by Protestant liberalism and twisted in a warped direction to affirm the unibble positions of sin as mere deprivation, salvation as education or re-socialization or political liberation, and universalism (i.e., because God is the Father of all people [in the creation sense], he will also be the Savior of all people [in the soteriological sense]). This liberal development of the concept has frightened away many evangelicals from embracing it, but the evangelical church does not need to be afraid to affirm that God is the Father of all people in the sense that he has created each and every person (Acts 17:26). This affirmation is very different from the affirmation of universalism that God will be the Savior of each and every person. Furthermore, this brotherhood and sisterhood of all humanity—this unity of the human race—has important ramifications for how human beings treat other human beings.

41 The germination of this idea comes from a discussion of Karl Barth, who emphasized the solidarity of Christians with God in Christ as they stand at his side: “They have not placed themselves at His side. They do not stand there on their own merits. They do so only in the power of the call of His free grace as it has come to
Concretely, the church expresses this commitment through its particular concern to care for the poor and marginalized, an engagement viewed as flowing from its embrace of the good news of Jesus Christ. Indeed, in the midst of clarifying the gospel of grace and protecting it from harmful accretions, Paul voices the sole instruction urged upon him by the apostles: “Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do” (Gal. 2:10). As the Gospel Coalition appropriately affirms:

God is concerned not only for the salvation of souls but also for the relief of poverty, hunger, and injustice. The gospel opens our eyes to the fact that all our wealth (even wealth for which we worked hard) is ultimately an unmerited gift from God. Therefore the person who does not generously give away his or her wealth to others is not merely lacking in compassion, but is unjust. Christ wins our salvation through losing, achieves power through weakness and service, and comes to wealth through giving all away. Those who receive his salvation are not the strong and accomplished but those who admit they are weak and lost. We cannot look at the poor and the oppressed and callously call them to pull themselves out of their own difficulty. Jesus did not treat us that way. The gospel replaces superiority toward the poor with mercy and compassion. Christian churches must work for justice and peace in their neighborhoods through service even as they call individuals to conversion and the new birth. We must work for the eternal and common good and show our neighbors we love them sacrificially whether they believe as we do or not. Indifference to the poor and disadvantaged means there has not been a true grasp of our salvation by sheer grace.42

Accordingly, salvation by grace, a gospel focus, and promotion of sac-
rificial concern for the poor and disenfranchised are all bound together as the church lives out the reality of the inaugurated kingdom of God, looking for and hastening the return of its King.

The Church and the Kingdom as an Eschatological Reality

While the church participates in and relishes the inaugurated reality of the kingdom of God, it hopes for the “not yet” aspects of the kingdom—indeed, the consummation of the kingdom in its fullness—to transpire soon. It longs for the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise, uttered at his trial before the high priest: “But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt. 26:64).

From a premillennial perspective, the triumphant return of the King either (1) will be preceded by the rapture of the church seven years in advance so as to provide escape from the divine wrath poured out on the earth during the great tribulation (dispensational premillennialism), or (2) will take place concurrently with the rapture of the church (historic premillennialism).43 In either case, the second coming will feature “the Word of God”—also named “King of kings and Lord of lords”—slaying all the enemies aligned against him (Rev. 19:11–21) and the resurrection of believers (Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:42–49; Phil. 3:20–21).44 The returning King and Lord will next establish his millennial kingdom on earth, during which the saints “will reign with him for a thousand years” (Rev. 20:1–6). According to some premillennialists, the millennium will feature the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of a national restoration of the Jewish people to the land of Israel; thus, the millennial kingdom will be strongly Jewish in flavor. At the conclusion of the millennium, Satan and his minions will engage in one last desperate battle against the Lord but will ultimately be defeated (vv. 7–10). The great white throne judgment follows (vv. 11–15), in which King Jesus exercises the authority delegated to him by the Father to judge (John 5:22, 26–27; Acts 10:42; 17:30–31; 2 Tim. 4:1). “Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his ene-

43Two other eschatological perspectives—amillennialism and postmillennialism—are noteworthy as evangelical positions on the end times. The first identifies the millennium with the present church age and holds out future hope for the return of Christ—along with the contemporaneous events of resurrection and judgment—to be followed immediately by the new heaven and new earth. The second holds that, through the preaching of the gospel and the Christianization of the world, this present church age will gradually yield to a golden age of peace and prosperity, to be followed by the return of Christ, resurrection, judgment, and the new heaven and new earth.

44For believers who are alive when Christ returns, their resurrection bodies will be slipped over their current earthly bodies (2 Cor. 5:4), an instantaneous transformation (1 Cor. 15:51–52) needed because “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (1 Cor. 15:50).
ties under his feet. . . . When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:24–28). This last reality is the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21–22).

Accordingly, the church’s hope is to participate in an eschatological kingdom featuring the following: the return of the King; the warrior “King of kings and Lord of lords”; the King’s reigning with his subjects over a millennial kingdom; the King as Judge; and the King’s yielding his kingdom to God the Father, “that God may be all in all.” Clearly, the church is not the ultimate reality in the redemptive plan of God, but as it lives the inaugurated reality of the kingdom of God, it fixes its hope on the eschatological kingdom to come.

To summarize, a complex relationship exists between the church and the kingdom according to five themes. First, the church relates to the kingdom as God’s universal rule and eternal dominion such that, in one sense, the church owes its existence to the kingdom and, in another sense, the church is the instrument through which entrance into the kingdom is granted. The second relationship between the church and the kingdom as Israel has been viewed in several different ways, with my own perspective being that the administration of the kingdom has been wrenched away from the Jewish people and granted instead to the church, yet with pride of place being restored to the Jewish people in the millennial kingdom. A third relationship is that between the church and the kingdom as belonging to the Son of Man/Davidic King. As Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophetic hope for a Son of Man/Davidic King to be a light for all peoples, the church confesses that “Jesus is Lord,” acknowledging his absolute kingship while subverting all other claimants to such allegiance, whether those are earthly kings or heavenly dominions. Fourth, the church relates to the kingdom as an inaugurated reality, specifically living as a missional church that presses on toward kingdom maturity through suffering for Christ. A final relationship is between the church and the kingdom as an eschatological reality, which features the church intensely longing for this angelic announcement: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

How the Church Should Live in Light of Its Complex Relationship to the Kingdom

If I may be permitted a few points of encouragement and exhortation from the above discussion, I call the church to engage in the following action
points: First, members of the church are urged to “not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.” The reason for this prohibition flows from our topic: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:13, 17). Empowered by the Spirit, who fosters an atmosphere conducive to love and unity, church members renounce petty preferences, yield their rights to one another, and “pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (v. 19).

Second, church members are called to be worthy ambassadors for Christ, as Paul instructed:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:18–21)

The church's ministry of reconciliation is primarily about the message (λόγος; logos; word) of reconciliation, the gospel of the substitutionary, sacrificial death of Jesus on behalf of the world and his resurrection from the dead (1 Cor. 15:1–4). As his ambassadors, the church must understand its missional identity and thus prioritize its gospel ministry.

Third, the church engages in this ministry of reconciliation, while living circumspectly with self-discipline, because of the following reality: “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:9–11). Living in the midst of an increasingly tolerant society, whose tolerance of kingdom-shutting sin tragically spreads, the church must be in the world and for the world, but never of the world in the sense of compromising with its sin.

Fourth, as it lives in light of the kingdom as an eschatological reality, and thus cognizant of the impending destruction of this present
earth—“the removal of things that are shaken”—the church must heed the encouragement of the writer to the Hebrews: “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:27–29). Indeed, this God whom the church worships through its Savior, Jesus Christ, is worthy of the church’s praise and devotion: “To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” (1 Tim. 1:17).
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