
The Kingdom of God

Stephen Um

The Gospel Coalition Booklets

Edited by **D. A. Carson & Timothy Keller**

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Contemporary people have difficulty with authority. The self-proclaimed libertine denies any ruling structure—except for his own intrinsic self-authority—since he believes that no authoritative power has the ability to emancipate. External authority is seen as intrinsically oppressive. Grant that conclusion, and it is easy to nurture the illusion that we humans do not need any external authority. A scene in Monty Python’s *The Holy Grail* illustrates well this anti-authority sentiment while satirically suggesting that certain forms of lordship can be suppressive and coercive.

KING ARTHUR: Old woman.

DENNIS: Man.

KING ARTHUR: Man, sorry. What knight lives in that castle over there?

DENNIS: I’m 37.

KING ARTHUR: What?

DENNIS: I’m 37. I’m not old.

KING ARTHUR: Well I can’t just call you “man.”

DENNIS: Well, you could say “Dennis.”

KING ARTHUR: I didn’t know you were called Dennis.

DENNIS: Well, you didn’t bother to find out, did you?

KING ARTHUR: I did say sorry about the “old woman,” but from behind you looked . . .

DENNIS: What I object to is you automatically treat me like an inferior.

KING ARTHUR: Well, I am king.

DENNIS: Oh, king, eh? Very nice. And how’d you get that, eh? By exploiting the workers. By hanging on to outdated imperialist dogma which perpetuates the economic and social differences in our society . . .

KING ARTHUR: I am your king.

WOMAN: I didn’t know we had a king. I thought we were an autonomous collective . . .

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KING ARTHUR: I am your king.

WOMAN: Well, I didn't vote for you.

KING ARTHUR: You don't vote for kings.

WOMAN: Well, how'd you become king then?

[Angelic music plays]

KING ARTHUR: The Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water, signifying by divine providence that I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur. THAT is why I am your king.

DENNIS: [interrupting] Listen, strange women lyin' in ponds distributin' swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony.

This culturally dominant interpretation of self-determination is supported by postmodernist thinkers like Don Cupitt, who declares, "The age of authority of grand institutions, of legitimating myths, and capital T-Truth, is over."¹ Cupitt makes his declaration with bold authority—and that of course makes his declaration ironic, even self-negating. This is the irony and the paradox of choice. Modern individuals believe that the multiplicity of options is liberating, but it is actually debilitating and ultimately demotivating and tyrannizing.² According to Richard Bauckham:

God therefore is undoubtedly implicated in the contemporary crisis of freedom. . . . Belief in God . . . seems to many incompatible with human autonomy. . . . All too often in church history God has been misrepresented as suppressing rather than promoting freedom. He has been the heavenly despot who is the model and sanction for oppressive regimes on earth. It is clear that this is not the biblical God. His lordship liberates from all human lordship. This is because the divine Master himself fulfills his lordship not in domination but in the service of a slave (Phil. 2:6–11).³

What then of authority and kingship in the Christian faith? Postmodernism empowers the individual's intrinsic authority and casts it over against the extrinsic authoritarian claims of Enlightenment rationality or premodern religious authority. By contrast, the Bible's message promotes not self-mastery but the authority

of grace. Authority belongs in the first place to God and his gracious self-donation to us.⁴ In other words, the increase of intimacy enjoyed by individuals in a relationship will inevitably, naturally, and simultaneously decrease their level of independence.

The Bible introduces the undisputed reality of the authority of God, his Word, and of truth revealed by him. Therefore, the theme of the kingship of God is one of the central and key motifs in all of Scripture. This booklet examines a theology, an identity, and a community shaped by this kingdom.

A Theology Shaped by the Kingdom

The concept of the kingdom of God is an important teaching found in all of Scripture. The Bible also calls it the “kingdom of heaven,” the “kingdom of Christ,” the “kingdom of the Lord,” and the “kingdom.” Since the Bible is one book, many commentators have attempted to find one unifying biblical theme that holds the two Testaments together. There are obviously many complementary biblical themes of great importance, but a good case can be made for the view that “the bond that binds [the Testaments] together is the dynamic concept of the rule of God.”⁵

It is curious to notice in the landscape of biblical interpretation that there have been numerous explanations for the biblical term *kingdom*. Some have reduced the kingdom of God to the present subjective realm and inward power of the Spirit at work in the human heart, while others have either defined the idea to a new, future, heavenly, spiritual order or equated the kingdom with the visible church.

Still others have taken a reductionistic approach in understanding the kingdom as an ideal social program for human civilization without referring to individual redemption. Therefore, according to this approach, “building” the kingdom means restoring all social problems such as poverty, social injustice, and various forms of inequalities.

There has been a diversity of interpretations throughout history because the biblical teaching embraces disparate emphases: the kingdom as both a present reality (Matt. 12:28; 21:31; Mark 10:15) and a future blessing (1 Cor. 15:50; Matt. 8:11; Luke 12:32), both a spiritual and saving blessing of new life (Rom. 14:17; John 3:3) and an expanded future rule of society (Rev. 11:15).

The key to resolving the different emphases is figuring out what

the Bible means by the word *kingdom*. What is the kingdom of God? Most modern dictionaries will define the word as a “sphere,” “realm,” or “place.” This explanation has misguided interpreters away from the biblical understanding that emphasizes the rank, rule, reign, dominion, and royal authority of God.⁶

Jesus’ parable in Luke 19 makes clear the fundamental meaning of the kingdom of God. The story describes a nobleman who “went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return” (Luke 19:12). This man did not visit another country in order to secure for himself a realm over which to exercise his rule; rather, he left his own place and went elsewhere to obtain the authority, the kingship, the right to rule the territory to which he returns (Luke 19:15; indeed, the rsv has “kingly power”). (It is possible Jesus is thinking of Herod, who went away to Rome to secure Caesar’s blessing so that he might return to Judea and reign as King Herod.)

The kingdom of God is fundamentally God’s sovereign rule expressed and realized through the different stages of redemptive history. This biblical doctrine derives from the truth that God, as the one true, living, and eternal Ruler, always existed and therefore reigns over his creation. “The kingdom of God, already present but not fully realized, is the exercise of God’s sovereignty in the world toward the eventual redemption of all creation.”⁷

God’s Rule in Creation

When discussing the theology of kingship, many have inadequately emphasized God’s cosmic rule as the creator of the world (Pss. 24:1; 93:1; 95:3–7; 47:1–9; 83:18; 103:19; 113:5; Dan. 4:25–26; 5:21; Matt. 5:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 1:16; Heb. 12:2; Rev. 7:15). There is a clear connection between Yahweh’s kingly reign and the history of the Israelite monarchy (1 Samuel 8), but God’s royal rule began with his sovereign administration and preservation of the cosmic order he had created. Goldsworthy states:

God’s own sovereign rule was epitomized in the probationary world which set the bounds of human freedom within the kingdom (Gen. 2:15–17). The blessedness of kingdom existence consisted in both the relationship of man to God and the relationship of man to creation. Nature was submissive to man’s dominion and fruitful in providing his needs.⁸

The royal administration of God the Maker-Lord was mediated through the “assignment of dominion to man over the world under conditions of Edenic beatitude (Gen 1:28) [which] can be seen as signaling a covenantal relationship between God and man.”⁹

The theme of the kingdom of God is well attested throughout the changing historical periods that Scripture portrays. The concept of God as king was basic to a nomadic people who viewed their God as the sovereign ruling king. He accompanied their travels and provided protection and shelter while developing a line of descendants who would be chosen to be his special people.

The focus of this description of God’s reign is primarily on the children of Abraham and the land of Israel.¹⁰ Genesis 4–11 describes the line of Abraham to whom the significant covenantal promises were given concerning a great nation, a great land, and a covenantal rule and relationship (Gen. 12:1–3). Some have interpreted the threefold promise as highlighting the biblical description of the kingdom of God, namely, God’s people, God’s realm, and God’s rule.¹¹

God’s Rule in the Exodus

At the time of the exodus from Egypt, God established his reign over Israel’s history through a series of divine interventions and mighty acts of salvation (e.g., see Exodus 15; Deut. 6:20–24; 26:5–10; Josh. 24:5–13; Psalms 78; 105; 106; 114; 135; 136; Neh. 9:9–15), the deliverance of the people who were in bondage, the distribution of the miracles of the plagues and the parting of the sea, the preservation of the Israelites in the wilderness, along with theophanic experiences. The people recognized that Yahweh’s sovereignty was constituted by his successive acts of salvation, “forming a God-controlled continuity, a history, and that this history was moving forward to a future according to God’s will.”¹² God asserted his ruling activity when he delivered his people from the hands of Pharaoh and brought them into the Promised Land (Exodus 15; 19:5–6).

God’s Rule in the Period of the Monarchy and the Prophets

The history of salvation during the period of the monarchy is full of tragedies. Israel was called and set apart to be a blessing to the world and to be God’s vice-regents to oversee the land (1 Chron. 29:23; 2 Chronicles 6), but sadly its history was marked more by infidelity

than faithfulness, idolatry than worship, and rebellion than obedience. The heavenly host has always worshiped and continues to praise God's holiness with "unqualified voluntary service,"¹³ but humans have refused to honor God as king, which explains the rising of earthly kingdoms filled with evil opposition to God. Therefore, the prophetic books introduce a message of hope that will be ushered in by the Messiah, who "will judge the wicked and bring redeemed humanity into a new creation (Ezekiel 36; 47; Isaiah 35; 55; 65; Zechariah 14)."¹⁴

This will be the stage in redemptive history, a great and glorious day in the future when all things will be restored, when God's universal rule will break in (Isa. 26:1–15; 28:5–6; 33:5–24, 17–22; 44:5; Ezek. 11:17–21; 20:33–38; Hos. 2:16–17; Zech. 8:1–8), along with the righteousness of the kingdom (Isa. 11:3–5; Jer. 23:5–6), and everlasting peace and harmony (Isa. 2:2–3; 9:5–6; 11:6–7; 35:9; Mic. 5:4; Zech. 9:9–10).¹⁵

God's Messianic Rule in the New Testament

In the New Testament, both Jesus and John the Baptist announce that the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15), the final stage of the kingdom on earth being realized by the incarnation and ongoing ministry of Christ (Matt. 2:2; 4:23; 9:35; 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 16:16; 23:3; John 18:37). Although this earthly ministry is already present, the consummate and complete fulfillment will not yet be realized until the return of Christ in glory (1 Cor. 15:50–58; Rev. 11:5).

This central mission of ushering in the final stage of the kingdom is presented to allow a broken and fallen humanity to enter into the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:20; 7:21; John 3:3). The realized kingdom, God's powerful rule, was entering "historical life in a new way, for here was the King himself coming 'to announce the decisive redeeming act of God, and to perform it.'"¹⁶ Even his parables are used as a teaching vehicle to illustrate to his followers the truths of his kingdom (Matt. 13:11). Although the benefits and privileges of the gospel are already present in part (Eph. 1:3), the future blessedness of glory is promised to those for whom it was prepared (Matt. 25:31, 34).¹⁷

Throughout the Old Testament there are numerous inter-canonical themes where the plots of stories thicken with dramatic tension and seemingly irreconcilable resolutions.¹⁸ Only in the person of Christ can

the tensions be resolved and the expectations of a perfectly righteous, peaceful, salvation-supplying rule be completely fulfilled. Ever since the garden, humanity through its fall lost the freedom to enjoy the glories of God's rule; therefore, the drama of human history would be forever engaged in an insatiable pursuit of finding the perfect true king.

The tragedy of biblical history, especially during the period of the monarchy, is a picture of the people's failed attempt to learn how to submit to the rule of God. Instead of surrendering their self-creation, self-promotion, and self-salvation to monarchy, Israelite history shows the enslavement of the human heart to idolatry. All of the corporate representatives of God's people—from Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David to all of the other great redemptive figures—failed to resolve the tension in the salvation storyline in providing healing and liberation from slavery and bondage. The resolution provided by God was unexpected: God himself through the incarnation visited a fallen humanity, and the renewal of all things broken took place through the work of a suffering Messiah. With magnificent irony, God identified himself with the godforsaken.

This paradoxical picture of God's willingness to identify in his death with godforsaken people is linked to the suffering servant in Isaiah 52:13–53:12, this servant who bore the sins of many and suffered in a substitutionary way.

It was in this context of the necessary link between the uniqueness of God and his [final] acts for the salvation of Israel and the world that the early Christians read of the enigmatic figure of the Servant of the Lord, who witnesses to God's unique deity and who, in chapters 52–53, both suffers humiliation and death and also is exalted and lifted up.¹⁹

The unfolding hope of redemption for human rebellion and renewal for a broken creation finds its expression and fulfillment in Jesus Christ come in the flesh. The kingdom now has its objective reality realized in the historical arrival and activity of the messianic king. The biblical description of the kingdom highlighting God's people, his place, and his power has its complete final resolution in Jesus, who is God's true people, presence, and authority.

Fulfillment of God's People

Luke describes Adam as the son of God (Luke 3:38) while Exodus 4:22 refers to Israel, the people of God, as God's firstborn son. The sonship motif was fulfilled in Jesus, who as the perfect second-Adam, the "beloved Son" (Luke 3:22 *ESV*), and true Israel accomplished what both the first Adam and Israel failed to do, namely, submitting to the cosmic King. "Thus the temptation narratives show the reversal of Satan's conquest of Adam in the garden and of Israel in the wilderness," and therefore, "all the prophecies concerning the restoration of Israel [as] the people of God must [find] their fulfillment in Him."²⁰

Fulfillment of God's Presence

The "tabernacle imagery is able to . . . portray the person of Jesus as the locus of God's Word and glory among humankind."²¹ What was impossible for Moses, seeing the radiant glory of God (Ex. 33:20), has become possible for those who believe (John 1:14) since the Word incarnate has seen God (John 1:18; 3:11).

Therefore, the description of Jesus' symbolizing the ultimate manifestation of the dwelling place of God appropriately introduces the temple motif in the Gospel of John. He is the "eternal cosmic-human Temple of God"²² who tabernacled among his people "by its totally different form of proximity,"²³ which symbolizes the ushering in of the final presence of God's temple in the messianic age. In this "temple," the body of Christ (John 2:19–22), the ultimate sacrifice would be made; yet Jesus says that after three days the true, spiritual temple will be raised from the dead to replace the Jerusalem temple.²⁴

The kingdom of God cannot be separated from the presence of Jesus (Heb. 12:22–23).²⁵ God's self-disclosure is accomplished by the manifestation of his living presence in the true temple. True worship has a new temple; Jesus replaces the temporal location. The people of God are now able to experience the fullness of eternal life and the abundant blessings of the new creation not available through land rights and a temporary inheritance.

Finally, the church is able to be utterly known by a holy God but not rejected. The tabernacle was where heaven and earth met with the glory of God sitting on the invisible throne on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant behind "the shielding curtain" in the Most Holy Place. Greater access was provided when the true temple "tabernacled"

among us (Col. 2:17). When the God-man, the true temple, was crucified, his body was torn and blood was shed to pay for our sin, and it was “at that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Matt. 27:51).

The ultimate insider who had enjoyed fellowship within the Godhead came into a distant country in order to seek lost, marginalized outsiders by becoming an outsider himself who was rejected, abandoned, consumed, crushed, and despised for the iniquities of the church (cf. Heb. 13:11–12). The shielding curtain was torn, the flaming sword of the angel consumed the perfect sacrifice so that we, the church, might have unending access to the presence of our holy God. Exodus 40:33 states, “And so Moses finished the work” (cf. Gen. 2:2 esv: “God finished his work that he had done”), which foreshadows the final words of Jesus and of his perfect fulfillment of redemption: “It is finished” (John 19:30). The church has been emancipated from bondage freely to enjoy our God, who is Spirit, in order to worship him in Spirit and in the reality of the true temple.

Fulfillment of God's Rule

Jesus is not only the true people and final presence of God but also the final authority of God's kingly power. For example, the act of granting life-giving water (or life itself), identified as a divine activity performed by a sovereign creator who has the authority to dispense life (see Isa. 44:3), is attributed to Jesus (John 4:13–14; see also 4:10). The Old Testament's accounts of both creation and salvation unambiguously describe God as the sole, authoritative giver of life (Gen. 1:11–12, 20–31; 2:7; Job 33:4; Isa. 42:5; Ezek. 36:26). The divine activity of granting life flows from God's own identity and distinguishes his uniqueness.

These divine functions are exercised by Jesus. In other words, Jesus participates in God's unique activity of creation and the new creation.²⁶ Jesus answers the woman in John 4 by saying, “Whoever drinks the water *I give* him will never thirst” and “the water *I give* him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (4:14). Jesus dispenses life; he dispenses the right to become the children of God (see John 1:12, “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, *he gave* the right to become children of God”; 5:21, “For

just as the *Father* raises the dead and *gives them life*, even so the *Son gives life* to whom he is pleased to give it”).

The Christian's Identity Shaped by the Kingdom

Our confessional documents state that “those who have been saved by the grace of God through union with Christ by faith and through regeneration by the Holy Spirit *enter the kingdom of God* and delight in the blessings of a new covenant” (emphasis added). The Christian's place in the kingdom of God necessarily shapes his or her identity. The saving plan of God's sovereign rule is manifested in the life of a Christian in three different ways: works of grace, the benefits of grace, and the effects of grace.

Works of Grace

First, God's kingly rule in redemption mediated and accomplished by Jesus Christ is a saving work established by his grace whereby an estranged sinner is regenerated, reconciled, and allowed to enter the kingdom of God. Humans who embrace a determined self-focus resist grace because they are not comfortable with any authority in their lives other than their own. It is a power struggle of gargantuan proportions. The Bible portrays the human plight as living under the power of sin and the passions of the flesh (Eph. 2:1–3). That is why we are in need of redemption from sin by the saving work of a merciful God. Bauckham states:

We should think of the compulsions of sin, from whose grip we cannot get free by ourselves, as not just the inner compulsions to sin in fallen human nature, but also the forces outside individual persons, such as consumerism, which appeal to the base desires of human nature and exploit people by latching onto the human tendencies to greed, lust, envy and excess. The grip in which many contemporary people are held is an alliance between the worst of the forces that control our society and the worst aspects of their own inner selves.²⁷

Paul states that the human heart is fallen, but he does not say that we harden our hearts because our understanding is darkened but rather that our understanding is darkened because of the hardness and the corruption of our hearts (Eph. 4:18). God manifested his kingly reign on earth to redeem fallen humans. Sin is placing any center or

ultimate value in our hearts that displaces God so as to fundamentally govern our pursuit of happiness, significance, and identity (see Ex. 20:1–2; Rom. 1:25). Sin is our desire to substitute ourselves in the place of God, whereas God discloses his grace in Jesus by substituting himself in our place.²⁸ He redeemed us by making full atonement and absorbing the punishment our sins deserved and securing justification and acceptance freely by his grace.

Because of the inner compulsions of sin, the Bible emphasizes the radical priority of the inner life rather than the outer life. The cycle of idolatry (Gal. 4:8) expands its influential work through the stages of adultery and autonomy (James 4:13–16). Whether the personal center is one's career, relationships, money, academic achievement, or sex, if an individual lives for anything besides Jesus, then that functional god will abuse, crush, and tyrannize one's heart.

Those who live for Jesus will receive the loving approval of this king and will be set free (Gal. 5:1). Living for one's selfish pride will cause a person to live under the weight of a curse, since people can never live up to their expectations or measure up to their high standards, never mind the perfect holy law of God. My identity is not a matter of who I am but whose I am. So both religious and irreligious people are avoiding God as Savior and Lord—but in different ways. Both are seeking to keep control of their lives by looking to something besides God as their salvation.²⁹

The Bible provides us with a beautiful picture of a gospel that is multifaceted. Some have tried to pit the “eternal life gospel” that is dominant in John's Gospel with the “kingdom gospel” of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), but each Gospel writer is expressing a form that is helpful not only for his own theological focus but also for his particular audience.

Moreover both John and the Synoptics can link “life” and the “kingdom of God.” In responding to Nicodemus in John's Gospel, Jesus combines the idea of regeneration and new life with the kingdom of God in order to introduce to a Pharisee the truths about this new life (John 3:3, 5).

Similarly, Mark records Jesus as saying, “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you *to enter life* maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out” (Mark 9:43). On the other hand, in verse 47 Jesus asserts, “And if your eye causes you to

sin, pluck it out. It is better for you *to enter the kingdom of God* with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell.” Mark thus refers to the kingdom of God as “life.”

John uses “life” and “eternal life” to refer to the kingdom of God. To John, eternal life is the same reality as the kingdom of God. They are used interchangeably to refer not only to the authoritative power of a Savior who grants eternal life but also to the sovereign reign of a king who rules people’s hearts.

The Benefits of Grace

One of the benefits of being united with Christ and receiving eternal life and the forgiveness of sins is becoming a new citizen of God’s kingdom (Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20). This Pauline image touches the Christian in both private experience and public interaction. Paul describes the various rights and duties of a citizen who is a stranger and alien in a foreign land. Christians conduct themselves in relationship to others in ways that adorn the gospel, seek the other’s good, and bring glory to Christ. They do this because they are members of a radically different community, God’s kingdom, and are in union with the person in charge of history.

Even when a Roman citizen went outside of his home city, his rights and responsibilities as a citizen were still intact wherever he traveled within the Empire. In the same way, the Christian’s rights and responsibilities within the kingdom of King Jesus extend to the farthest reaches of his reign. Again, just as Paul had the right to appeal to the Roman Emperor, a citizen of God’s kingdom can appeal to the final authority of King Jesus.

The Christian should be encouraged to know, however, that Jesus is a different kind of emperor; he always responds with interest to any case or concern of one of his citizens. Since the gospel confirms the Christian of his legal standing and permanent status, he can gain confidence in knowing the truth that no degrees exist in citizenship.

In other words, either you are a citizen or you are not; either you are a child or you are not. This truth will repudiate any false notions and insecurities about one’s performance determining his status as a citizen. In other words, one does not become a second-class citizen when one is less obedient and a first-class citizen when one is more obedient.

And what is the fundamental criterion that makes an individual a citizen of a country? It is not his race, ethnicity, language, fashion, or cultural or socioeconomic background. It's whether or not the individual has been naturalized into the country as a citizen. What is the criterion for someone's being a Christian? It is the fact that he or she has received citizenship not because of social, cultural, racial, or moral location but because of the grace of the King. Once an alien (Eph. 2:19), he or she is now a citizen with full rights and privileges in a new community.

The Effects of Grace

Along with these rights and privileges, a citizen has a responsibility to represent well the king of this kingdom. "As fellow super-naturalized citizens with the saints" (Eph. 2:19), God's people are a radically different, countercultural, cosmopolitan community. They share a common spiritual language and an allegiance that supersedes all other loyalties. They share not only a common duty and responsibility but more importantly a common goal and delight in glorifying, honoring, and obeying the one true king.

Rather than adoring our God, however, we often engage in self-congratulatory praise. But the effect of saving grace has awakened us to see Jesus as utterly majestic. The picture of his kingliness in his triumphal entry (John 12:12–19) is an ironic combination of majesty and meekness, holiness and humility. This is the paradox of Jesus's kingliness. It's an upside-down, subversive picture of how the servant-king came in humility. What we all really long for is a perfect king who will come to give us a kingliness we desperately want. We want an ideal king who is bold and sweet, brave and meek, all at the same time.

In the Gospel of John, when John uses the verb "to be glorified" or "lifted up," he is frequently referring to the cross. So what John is trying to say is that if you want to know the fullness of God's glory, then it can be found not in the triumphs of the miracles but in the cross. Jesus Christ came into the world in a paradoxical way and was glorified. He said, in effect, "The way that I am going to show you how great a king I am is that I left the riches of my heavenly place, came to this world, became nothing, and made you, who are impoverished, rich."

People had false expectations of their messianic king, and they did not anticipate the coronation of their king coming through a cross.

Whenever we think about this upside-down, paradoxical kingliness of Jesus, who is majestic and meek, holy and humble, we desire the same royalty that creates our hearts to be both lamb-like and lionhearted, and courageous and compassionate at the same time. Keller summarizes this divine excellency well:

It's only paradoxical to the world. But it's real royalty to us. In Jesus Christ we see the combination of infinite power and complete vulnerability, unbounded justice yet unending mercy, transcendent highness and exquisite accessibility and nearness. We feel in the present something completely wild and unpredictable. It's mighty, it's powerful, and yet perfectly under control. The attraction is deep. It is really, really deep. It's a lordliness, it is a royalty, it's a kingliness that we all long to have. The majesty is more majestic for the tenderness, the tenderness more tender for the majesty. If you come face to face with this gentle king who comes riding on a colt, you will become a gentle king. You will become more bold and yet more humble at the same time. But only if you understand how it is to be saved, that it will happen not through strength but it will happen through weakness. That it is not through your moral exertion but it is going to be submitting to the grace of God.³⁰

Community Shaped by the Kingdom

All peoples, institutions, and groups are interested in changing, renewing, or transforming society by impressing their core values on the culture. For that matter, we cannot help but make an impact on our culture. The minute anyone opens his mouth, he is speaking in a particular language, from a particular cultural context, with a particular worldview of morality and various definitions of what he believes to be the “true,” the “good,” and the “beautiful.” No one should be led to think that he is not “getting into the public square.”

In addressing the question, “Is it the church’s responsibility to embrace the civic responsibility of the state (e.g., education, the poor, social injustice, the arts, etc.)?” we need to consider the following. The church does not have any juridical authority in the city/state public square, but that does not mean that the church ought to stay on the periphery. The church does have the responsibility to act in mercy and to engage our community with deeds of social justice (see James 1:27).³¹

Paul states in Galatians 6:10, “As we have opportunity, let us do

good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”³² James says that true religion is this: “To look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (1:27). In other words, it is the church’s responsibility to pursue both public compassion and personal piety. For example, although a failing school system is not the civic responsibility of the church, the church may well get involved in “doing good” by coming alongside the local school in providing after-school tutoring.

Christians ought to cultivate friendships with people in their neighborhoods. This may well mean joining clubs and associations, and partnering with organizations that are also involved in acts of mercy and benevolent involvement. None of this means that the primacy of heralding the gospel is undermined. Rather, the effect of the gospel, the entailment of the gospel, is the inevitable transformation of men and women such that we begin to love our neighbors where once we loved only ourselves.

This pattern so contradicts the thinking and practice of the world, that it creates an “alternate kingdom,” an “alternate city” (Matt. 5:14–16) in which there is a complete reversal of the values of the world with regard to power, recognition, status, wealth. The gospel reverses the place of the weak and the strong, the “outsider” and the “insider.” It is an advantage, spiritually speaking, to see one’s weakness; it is a severe danger, spiritually speaking, to be successful and accomplished. And when we finally understand that we can be saved by sheer grace through Christ, we stop seeking salvation (either that of psychological fulfillment, or of social transformation, or of spiritual blessing, or of all three) in power, status and accomplishment. That destroys their power in our lives. The reversal of the cross, the grace of God, thus liberates us from bondage to other power of material things and worldly status in our lives. We begin to live a new life without much regard to them.³³

Some people live in the city and find their needs met there: they obtain credentials, status, education, training, and influence. Others are almost consumed by the city. But Christians desire to live counter-culturally to create the new alternative community of God’s kingdom. They participate in the in-breaking of God’s presence and rule among a people he has claimed as his own, as he forms them into a radically dis-

tinct, set-apart community that looks forward to the total in-breaking of his authority expressed throughout the world.³⁴

Christians refuse to believe that there are only two options in engaging our culture: either to assimilate or to separate, to capitulate or evade, to over-contextualize or under-adapt. Jeremiah 29 encourages God's people not to accommodate the foreign culture but to move in and get involved in the life of the city economically and culturally. The prophet is asking the people to be spiritually bicultural. They are being called neither to worship the city nor to hate the culture, but to love the city.

Barry Schwartz says that people are engaged in a psychology of personal autonomy.³⁵ We have all sorts of goals, expectations, and desires to reach the heights because we are maximizers engaged in social comparison, mixed opportunities, regret, adaptation, and trying to meet high expectations. He says that there is a psychology of personal autonomy, but there is also another perspective that he calls the "ecology of personal autonomy." That is, if we pursue our own psychology for our own ends, sooner or later this will come in conflict with the ecology of personal autonomy (i.e., the ecological structure, in which everyone is pursuing their own ends, such that the structure that maintains personal autonomy is undermined), and then something has to give. You cannot pursue your own goals and also support someone else's when they're in conflict. It is difficult to pursue the common good when the common good is in tension with self-interest. However:

The gospel thereby creates a "kingdom community"—a counter-culture, the church—in which we are "royal priests" showing the world what the future kingdom will look like (1 Peter 2:9–10.) We "model" how all of life—business practices, race relations, family life, art and culture—are healed and re-woven by the King.³⁶

Kingdom-driven alternative communities will have a healthy balance between "theologically substantial preaching, dynamic evangelism and apologetics, and church growth" and planting of churches that will "emphasize repentance, personal renewal, and holiness of life" and winsome "engagement with the social structures of ordinary people, and cultural engagement with art, business, scholarship, and government."³⁷ The fabric of our communities and the interiority of hearts will continue to be restored and reshaped under the kingly reign of Christ, the head over all his creation.

Notes

1. Don Cupitt, "Post-Christianity," in *Religion, Modernity, and Postmodernity*, Religion and Spirituality in the Modern World, ed. Paul Heelas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 218.
2. Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 2–3.
3. Richard J. Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2002), 50–51.
4. Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom*, 68.
5. John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1980), 196ff.
6. The primary definition of both the Hebrew word *malkuth* and the Greek word *basileia* describes the rank, authority, and sovereign rule exercised by a king. The kingdom may make reference to the realm, sphere, place, or people, but these are secondary definition entries to that of a sovereign kingly rule (see Pss. 103:19; 145:11, 13; Dan. 2:37).
7. The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement, § 3.
8. Graeme Goldsworthy, "The Kingdom of God and the Old Testament," <http://www.presenttruthmag.com/archive/XXII/22-4.htm>.
9. Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (South Hamilton, MA: Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary), 12.
10. Richard Pratt, "What Is the Kingdom of God?" <http://www.thirdmill.org/files/english/html/th/TH.h.Pratt.kingdom.of.god.html>.
11. Goldsworthy, "Kingdom of God and the Old Testament."
12. George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 19.
13. Pratt, "What Is the Kingdom of God?"
14. *Ibid.*
15. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 20.
16. John Piper, "Book Review of *The Kingdom of God* by John Bright," http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Articles/ByTopic/30/2687_Book_Review_of_The_Kingdom_of_God_by_John_Bright/.
17. George E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 15.
18. Tim Keller, "Preaching the Gospel," *PT 123 Gospel Communication* (Spring 2003): 58–59.
19. Richard J. Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 35.
20. Piper, "Kingdom of God."
21. Craig Koester, "The Dwelling of God: The Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental Jewish Literature, and the New Testament," *CBQMS* 22 (1989): 102.
22. *Ibid.*, 102. John 1:51 ("You shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man").
23. Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 51.
24. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 182.
25. Piper, "Kingdom of God."
26. Richard J. Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament*, Didsbury Lectures, 1996 (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), viii, 35.
27. Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom*, 17.
28. John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 160.
29. Tim Keller, "A Gospel for the More Secular," <http://redeemer.com/resources>, and especially his *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009).
30. Tim Keller, John 12 sermon, www.redeemer.com/sermons.

31. Confessional Statement: "Good works constitute indispensable evidence of saving grace . . . we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, doing good to all, especially to those who belong to the household of God. It therefore inevitably establishes a new community of human life together under God."
32. Confessional Statement: "We are to love our neighbors as ourselves, doing good to all, especially to those who belong to the household of God."
33. Tim Keller, "Preaching the Gospel," 33–34.
34. The Gospel Coalition Theological Vision for Ministry.
35. Schwartz, *Paradox of Choice*, 215–17.
36. The Gospel Coalition Theological Vision for Ministry.
37. Ibid.

“Contemporary people have difficulty with authority. The self-proclaimed libertine denies any ruling structure since he believes that no authoritative power has the ability to emancipate. External authority is seen as intrinsically oppressive. Grant that conclusion, and it is easy to nurture the illusion that we humans do not need any external authority What then of authority and kingship in the Christian faith? . . . The Bible’s message promotes not self-mastery but the authority of grace. Authority belongs in the first place to God and his gracious self-donation to us. The Bible introduces the undisputed reality of the authority of God, his word, and of truth revealed by him. . . . Therefore, the theme of the kingship of God is one of the central and key motifs in all of Scripture.”

—From the booklet

These Gospel Coalition booklets are edited by D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller and are designed to offer thoughtful explanations of the ministry’s confessional statement. The Gospel Coalition is an evangelical movement dedicated to the gospel of Christ and a Scripture-based reformation of ministry practices.

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