

# Editorial: Reflecting on the Kingdom of God

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No one can read the Gospels without being struck by the centrality of “the kingdom of God,” especially in the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. But unfortunately, in spite of its importance, over the years there has been a lot of confusion regarding what the kingdom of God precisely is, how the kingdom relates to the church, and how we should live in light of the coming of the kingdom. For example, the Roman Catholic Church identified the kingdom with the church as if they referred to the same thing. Most acknowledge today that this is an untenable position. Even in the Reformed tradition, though in a modified form, the kingdom and church have also been closely identified, particularly in appeal to Matt 3:24-30, the parable of the weeds. Here the argument is made that the church is not necessarily a regenerate community because she is comprised of both believers and unbelievers, due to the fact that the kingdom of God is a “mixed” reality of wheat and tares. But, as has been repeatedly pointed out, this interpretation greatly misunderstands Jesus’ own commentary on this parable where he clearly distinguishes the kingdom from the church. Other examples could be multiplied, whether it is Dispensationalism’s sharp distinction between the “kingdom of God and heaven,” or, more recently, the Emerging Church’s emphasis on the kingdom which views it more in terms of contemporary social activism than biblical teaching. Suffice it to say that there is

still a lot of confusion and misunderstandings over that which is so central to our Lord and the entire NT.

It is partly due to this ongoing confusion as well as the importance of the subject in its own right, that we have devoted an entire edition of *SBJT* to this theme. It is imperative that we reflect rightly on what the kingdom is. All of our articles as well as the Forum are devoted to thinking biblically and theologically about the kingdom so that, in some small way, we are better equipped to handle the Word of truth for the glory of our King. In the remainder of this editorial, I want to sketch out six points that give a mini-biblical theology of the kingdom. The reason for doing so is to set the stage for the articles and Forum, thus providing a basic framework for thinking about the kingdom across the canon.

First, what is the kingdom of God? Basically, the kingdom of God refers to God’s *kingly rule*, and it is especially tied to God’s *saving reign*. It does *not* primarily refer to a certain geographical location. Rather the phrase tells us more about *God* (the fact that he reigns) than anything else. Also, it must be noted that the NT understanding of the kingdom is firmly rooted in OT teaching and expectation. Even though the term “kingdom of God” is not found in the OT, the idea is everywhere. Second, Scripture begins with the declaration that God, as Creator, is the sovereign ruler of the universe. In this important sense, the entire universe is God’s kingdom. In fact,

in creating human beings as his image bearers, God gives us rule over his creation, under his authority, to display the glory of the King.

However, third, given the Fall, everything changes. The rightful rule of God over the entire creation is now rejected by the human race. Sin is essentially rebellion against the claims of the King, and, so, we now stand under God's judgment of death. In this important way, the OT makes a distinction between the sovereignty of God over the entire creation and the coming of his *saving reign* in the context of a rebellious creation. Thus, on the one hand, the kingdom of God will exclude all sin and rebellion. On the other hand, it will include all that is redeemed according to God's gracious will. Eventually, when all sin and evil is put down, we will see the fullness of God's kingdom.

Fourth, as the OT unfolds, God's kingdom, in this *saving sense*, is revealed in a number of ways. Following the loss of Eden, redemption is linked to the election of a people, the descendants of Abraham, to be the chosen people of God. They are promised a land to dwell in; they will be the means of blessing to the nations. These covenant promises are realized in the Exodus, a pattern of redemption. At Sinai, the people of God are constituted as a theocratic nation. Though rebellion leads to delay, the nation is eventually given possession of the land. Here the structures of government develop towards kingship under the dynasty of David in Jerusalem. Solomon builds the temple as the place where reconciliation and fellowship with God are established. The rule of the Davidic kings is representative of the rule of God over his kingdom. But the kings and Israel fail. The kingdom divides and judgment falls. However, fifth, the proph-

ets hold out hope. The overall pattern of renewal is seen as a recapitulation of the past history of redemption: a new Exodus; a new covenant; a new Jerusalem; a new Davidic king to rule in a glorious and eternal kingdom. In this way, the prophets anticipate the coming of the Messiah who will usher in God's kingdom, making all things right and reversing the effects of sin and death.

Sixth, it is against this background that the NT announces that, in Jesus, the long awaited kingdom has come and that the rule of sin and death has been destroyed. Thus, through Jesus' life and cross-work, he has *inaugurated* the kingdom of God over which he now rules and reigns. And, as the ascended King, he commands all people to repent and to enter that kingdom of life. But even though the kingdom has come, it still awaits its consummation. The biblical story does not end with Christ's first coming, but presses on to the *parousia*, when he shall appear once again and usher in the kingdom in its fullness and power. At that time, what is God's prerogative by right will be universally true as all people will acknowledge Christ to be Lord (Phil 2:10-11), and the entire universe will become *in fact* the realm of God's rule.

In brief, these six points lay out the Bible's overall teaching of the glorious kingdom of God. In what remains, this overall perspective will be developed in a variety of ways. It is our prayer that this edition of *SBJT* will not only help us understand better the biblical teaching, but also enable us to worship and serve our great King, as we cry with the entire church, "Come, Lord Jesus."