

# Kingdom, Covenant, and the Mission of the Church

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## Session One: Introduction, Definitions, and Biblical Theology

Introduction: About six years ago I was invited to participate in a writing project—a four views book on *biblical theological systems*. This particular project compared four approaches to the organizing structure of the Bible. Covenant Theology and Traditional Dispensationalism represented the poles, and two mediating positions, Progressive Covenantalism and Progressive Dispensationalism, were the interior positions. The book was finally published early last year as *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*.<sup>1</sup>

All four positions are peopled by evangelicals; all of the participants in the project have since collaborated for some very cordial follow-up dialogue, and we have another scheduled for later this year. We are all brothers in Christ, but we have differing views of the way that the whole biblical story line unfolds. One of the more visible differences that exist between these systems is their respective views of the future—things like if and when there will be a Rapture or if and when there will be a Millennial Kingdom, and the like.

But as the volume bears out, this is not the heart of the debate. While each position sports specific eschatological implications, these are not the centerpiece of any of the four approaches; they are implications of my whole biblical theology. And that's what all four of the positions represented in this book are—approaches to whole or canonical biblical theology. Before we can venture into questions of the Christian mission, the end of all things, and the homiletical development and applications of the book in front of us, we need to grapple with much more seminal concepts:

- What is/are the purpose(s) of God in the universe?
- What form(s) does God's government take?
- By what objective terms may one be rightly related to God's government?
- Who are the people(s) of God? (or if you find yourself cringing at the plural, what are the multiple sheep pens described in John 10, which together constitute God's one flock?)

More specifically, we ask,

- What are the Covenants of God and how do they relate to the Christian Church?
- What is the Kingdom of God, and what is its significance for the mission of the Christian Church?

I've been assigned three topics for this conference: Preaching about the Kingdom; Preaching about the New Covenant, and Preaching about the Church. As you may already have noticed,

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<sup>1</sup>Edited by Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022).

I'm not going to treat these topics equally. And that is because the initial definitions that we forge in this session will inevitably end up conflating certain of these topics in one way or another. Some models of biblical theology are comfortable equating the Kingdom with the Church; others are happy to call the Church the "New Covenant Community." Still others distance the Christian Church from both of these concepts—either in part or completely. These tend to see the New Covenant as establishing parameters for the life of a FUTURE people in a FUTURE kingdom, and thus as having minimal influence on the Christian Church of the now—if any at all.

We really can't start our topic until we offer extensive definition of all three notions and fit them into our biblical theology. And so that's what I plan to do with our first session. In effect we will be "doing" biblical theology. Most of you are familiar with biblical theology, because there has been more written on this topic in the past 20 years, likely, than we have seen in the whole history of the church. But we'd be wrong to suggest that biblical theology began with Jim Hamilton or Steve Wellum and Peter Gentry or Greg Beale or Graeme Goldsworthy or Fred Zaspel or even D. A. Carson. These together loosely represent one approach to biblical theology, probably best seen as a development of the approach proposed in the 1950s by Carl Henry and George Ladd. These figures, whose *inaugurated* approach to biblical theology traces most naturally to Oscar Cullmann, is actually a dialectical exercise that forged a bridge between two earlier approaches to biblical theology, the *futurist* approach to biblical theology championed by Albert Schweitzer and the *realized* eschatological approach to biblical theology championed by C. H. Dodd and separately by Geerhardus Vos.

The debate is far from resolved. There is no question that the dialectical approaches are currently in the ascendancy: Historic Premillennialism, Progressive Covenantalism, and Progressive Dispensationalism presently dominate the American evangelical discussion, but representatives at both poles remain quite comfortably entrenched—among others, Theonomists and other Postmillennialists, 2K-Amillennialists, and Traditional Dispensationalists. I'm being deliberate in my description. The fact that the dialectical approaches are currently in the ascendancy means that the narrative tends to paint these views as mainstream and that others as "fringe" views. In historical reality, this is inaccurate. Before the late 1940s, the three major dialectical approaches we have identified collectively were an empty set—all three sprang into existence in the past 75 years (or in the case of historic premillennialism revived an approach that had been dormant for 1600 years). Now this historical reality does not make them wrong, but it should, I think, shape our approach to the exercise.

The following is an attempt to offer a biblical theology from the standpoint of traditional dispensationalism. Our specific intent will be to place in the biblical narrative the three topics of our conference: Kingdom, Church, and New Covenant. Some of you will agree; others will not; some of you will discover specific points of agreement and specific points of disagreement. All of this is OK—I've developed some thick skin, and so long as we all remain cordial and objective in our dialogue, this can be valuable for us all. Because here's the thing that I hope we can all agree to. Before any of us can preach effectively on Church, Kingdom, and Covenant, we need to know what they are, and how they intersect with each other. If we can all agree on that, then we will have succeeded. So if you find yourself skeptical at some point, rather than storing up wrath, utilize your cerebral energies to revisit your own biblical theology, refine it as necessary, and ground it more thoroughly in the Scriptures than it currently is. So let's begin.

Like many books and sermons, the Bible does not offer us a clear, governing thesis statement. It is quite probable, in fact, that some of the Scripture-writers were not wholly aware, even, of the precise contribution that they were making to the thesis. But if the Bible is a good piece of literature (and I think that it is), each of its parts contributes substantially to its purpose. And that's important, right? Because if we propose a thesis that doesn't include all the parts, or if we have to engage in a bizarre hermeneutic to squeeze everything into our proposed thesis, perhaps we'd do better to revisit the thesis. Dr. Rolland McCune, my predecessor, argued that our thesis must have three features:

- a. *Comprehensiveness*: The center must incorporate in its scope *all* divine activity, *all* divine revelation, and *all* that God has created, including the material universe, the angelic realm, and the whole world of humanity, both elect and reprobate.

Dr. McCune's grievance was with redemptive-centered models common in Reformed and evangelical theologies. He felt that focusing all our attention on the Gospel (much less a covenant of redemption) was far too narrow and immanent a concern. His ministry was drawing to a close when the modern evangelical gospel-centered initiatives like T4G, TGC, and the like were just emerging, so he commented only minimally on these, but one was immediately aware that he was not a fan.

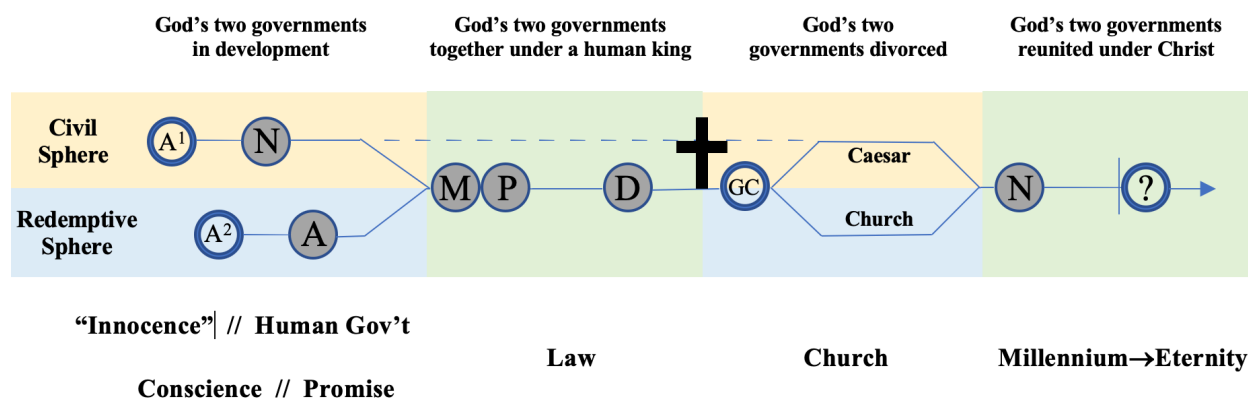
- b. *Significance*: The center must reflect a purpose of broad (not isolated) theological import that attaches to *all* the major nodal points and epochs in the biblical story line.
  - The Whole Creation (both personal and impersonal elements)
  - The Dominion Mandate
  - Human Government
  - The Fall and Sin
  - The Dispensations and Covenants (all of them)
  - The Giving of the Law
  - Redemption
  - The Whole Consummation of Human History—including all the judgments, the kingdom, and the eternal state of both the righteous and unrighteous.
- c. *Efficiency*: The *mitte* must be expressed not merely as a goal, but as a goal *with a plan of achievement*, i.e., a practical activity by which that goal is effected and realized.

His conclusion, and I share it, was that a Gospel center is an impossibly narrow center, and that the covenants (which Romans 9:4 argues as belonging uniquely to ethnic Israel) offered much too restrictive a structure to account for the whole biblical story line. He is far from alone in this conclusion. As most traditional dispensationalists have done, he opted for a **governmental** center for all God's activity, following the lead of George Peters, Erich Sauer, and most especially Alva J. McClain, premillennialists all, who were doing evangelical versions of biblical theology long before it became cool.

In the interest of full disclosure I admit that I have tinkered a bit with the biblical theological model proposed by my predecessor, but not, I would venture, substantially enough to call it a different approach. The principal informing source for my refinements are courtesy of James Hall Brooks, so-called "father of American dispensationalism," whose biblical theology, constructed in the crucible of the American Civil War, lay long dormant because he was on the "wrong side of history" in that conflict. It is my contention that his appeal to the two governments of God offer to us the principal basis for the dispensational approach, and I have made efforts to recover it. He did not, or course,

invent this approach to biblical theology. His approach was instead a refinement of one then hugely popular among Southern Presbyterians who had abandoned the postmillennial majority view of their denomination broadly, one that reverted to views held more primitively by Martin Luther (whose two Kingdoms understanding was extremely prominent in his theology) and John Calvin (whose *duplex in homine regimen* or “two-governments” model was likewise quite influential in its day). You need to remember that both Luther and Calvin preceded the historical development of “covenant theology” as a mature system by a full century. They tended instead to build on the 13th-century contributions of Bonaventure (the two swords) and Thomas Aquinas (the two laws). This approach went almost entirely into disfavor after the birth of covenant theology, but lives on in certain corners of amillennial life today, most prominently at Westminster Seminary West (Escondido), courtesy of Mike Horton and Dave VanDrunen. It also lives on, ironically, in dispensational theology.

So let’s take a look at this ancient approach to biblical theology, and in so doing, place and define the critical topics of our conference as preparation for our attempts to preach about them.



#### Alternative Models of Biblical Theology:

- Postmillennialism is a “one-kingdom” approach that sees the Kingdom as in a state of *present realization* (hence “realized” eschatology). The church is the primary instrument God is using to establish one all-encompassing kingdom. It is the task of the homiletician to equip the Church to “usher in” the kingdom in *all* of its prophetic detail prior to Christ’s return. This model began somewhat promisingly in the seventeenth century (the Puritan vision), but was largely overwhelmed in the 19th century by philosophies of immanence and anti-supernaturalism, which reduced the approach to a “social” gospel.
  - Walter Rauschenbusch, the recognized “father” of the social gospel, wrote, “If theology is to offer an adequate doctrinal basis for the social gospel, it must not only make room for the doctrine of the **Kingdom of God**, but give it a central place and **revise all other doctrines so that they will articulate organically with it. This doctrine is itself the social gospel**” (*Theology for the Social Gospel*, p. 131, cf. also 216–25). Rauschenbusch’s “Brotherhood of the Kingdom” served as perhaps the most critical missional manifesto for the period.

- In defense of the social gospel Washington Gladden wrote, “When we are bidden to seek first the **kingdom of God**, we are bidden to set our hearts on the great consummation when every department of human life—the families, the schools, amusements, art, business, politics, industry, national policies, international relationships—will be governed by the Christian law and controlled by Christian influences.... **The complete Christianization of all life is what we pray for and work for, when we work and pray for the coming of the kingdom of heaven**” (*The Church and the Kingdom*, p. 7).

The horrors of World War I led to the near extinction of the approach—clearly the church was failing to usher in the kingdom in all of its multi-faceted glory. There is, however, an evangelical resurgence of this view today in contemporary movements such as Christian Reconstructionism, Theonomy, and Christian Nationalism.

- Amillennialism represents a second form of realized eschatology, but has by-and-large retained a transcendent emphasis. The Church effectively IS the Kingdom, and the prophetic details of the Kingdom anticipate a spiritual rather than material/physical fulfillment. If modernist postmillennialism was guilty of *naturalizing* the Kingdom (in all of its rich OT detail), the amillennialist is guilty of *spiritualizing* the Kingdom (reducing almost all of the material references to the Kingdom to spiritual blessings in the Church).
- But it is here that we encounter a robust stream of amillennialists that hold sharply to “two kingdoms” (civil and cultic). These very sharply distinguish between the role of Christians (individually) and the role of the Church (collectively/institutionally) in civil society. In this model, a homiletician’s task is to equip saints to be good citizens living in God’s two kingdoms. He refuses, however, to commit the institutional church to initiatives beyond the scope of the Great Commission and to speak beyond the plain words of Scripture into the civil sphere. Modern representatives of this approach are Michael Horton (*Where in the World Is the Church?*), Dave VanDrunen (*Living in God’s Two Kingdoms*), and from a somewhat different vantage, but with many practical similarities, Kevin DeYoung (*What Is the Mission of the Church?*)

We have suggested above that Calvin and Luther were firmly in this 2K camp, but that this approach was largely lost in the scholastic period. The principal catalyst for its recovery was the American Civil War, which also shaped the notion of dispensationalism in no small degree.<sup>2</sup>

- The 1920s and 1930s, sometimes painted as a period of malaise in the history of theology, represent a time of massive upheaval and change. We are generally familiar with the Fundamentalist/Modernist Controversy (largely an American or at least English-speaking phenomenon), but in Europe, the controversy was between theologies of

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<sup>2</sup>See my article, “A Tale of Two Kingdoms: The Struggle for the Spirituality of the Church and the Genius of the Dispensational System,” *DBSJ* 19 (2014): 61–65; also Carl E. Sanders, III, *The Premillennial Faith of James Hall Brookes: Reexamining the Roots of American Dispensationalism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 37–102.

transcendence and immanence, or in terms of the Kingdom, between futurist eschatology (with Albert Schweitzer and Johannes Weiss as principal champions) and realized eschatology (with Dodd as a principal champion). But being a day in which *dialectical* approaches were prized, the winner in this struggle was neither of these approaches, but a hybrid approach called *inaugurated* theology. This approach held generally to a “one-kingdom” approach, but viewed the Kingdom and New Covenant as having **already** commenced, but as having **not yet** been realized. Oscar Cullman was a principal champion of this approach \*\*\*Kuyper is the holdout for 2K amillennialism, but his followers on both sides of the pond (sometimes called neo-Kuyperians or neo-Calvinists) quickly migrated to an inaugurated approach, so thoroughly so that Kuyper himself is often (but wrongly) associated with this view.

As was often the case, however, American theological trends lagged behind European ones, with the result that the epiphany of inaugurated theology did not arrive there until the late 1940s and 1950s.

- In 1947, Carl Henry laid down the gauntlet by publishing his *Uneasy Conscience of Fundamentalism* as a clarion call for middle ground between the “**kingdom now**” error of liberalism and the “**kingdom then**” error of dispensational fundamentalism. The latter error, however, clearly galled Henry the most, because it “cuts the nerve of world compassion,” “undercuts world relevance,” and “destroys the essential character of Christianity” (53, 57). He went so far as to say that any view of the kingdom that undercuts the church’s social mission “destroys the essential character of Christianity” (48). The only solution for dispensational fundamentalists, for Henry, was for them to alter their belief structure to affirm “both that **the kingdom is here, and that it is not here**” (53). This theological affirmation was, for Henry, the only way to (1) justify evangelical social action, to (2) reacquire world relevance and a “place at the table,” and to (3) thereby ensure the continued success of the Gospel. Later he would write, “**While not itself the kingdom, the church is the kingdom’s most vital approximation and manifestation in the present age. Its ongoing mission is to extend the King’s victory over the hostile forces of sin and evil, injustice and oppression**” (*Christian Countermoves in a Decadent Culture*, pp. 25–26).
- **George E. Ladd** was the principal architect of Cullmann’s dialectic approach in American life as the undergirding eschatology of both the “new” evangelicalism of his day, and the majority of contemporary conservative evangelicals (e.g., **Russell Moore**), progressive covenantalists (e.g., **Steve Wellum**) and progressive dispensationalists (e.g., **Darrell Bock**). For these, a (singular, non-differentiated) Kingdom began with the First Advent (often the resurrection/ascension, though this detail is negotiable), and anticipates a glorious climax at Christ’s (often but not always) premillennial Second Coming. The genius of the “already/not yet” approach was that it allowed the institutional church (and not just individual Christians) to incorporate into its mission “kingdom work” of every variety—not merely evangelism/discipleship, but social, political, economic, and in fact every sphere of life, all of which belong to God. Only by so doing, Ladd and Henry opined, could the holistic idea of “kingdom work” continue to advance and the success of the Gospel be assured.

**Conclusion:** The foregoing has all been intended to set a historical table of biblical-theological options for seating the New Covenant and the Kingdom of God relative to Israel and to the Christian Church. My point is not, of course, to suggest that these are all equal options. I have gone on record as defending a futurist view of Kingdom and Covenant. I would like to think that most of you share this approach, but irrespective of where you position yourselves, I am hopeful that you are better equipped, after this survey, to think more objectively about how we should preach and apply the biblical topics of Church, Kingdom, and Covenant.

# Kingdom, Covenant, and the Mission of the Church

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## Session Two: Preaching to the Church About the Kingdom

### I. Defining “Kingdom” in Scripture

When the word *kingdom* is used in Scripture, the meaning is not monolithic. This does not mean, however, that the term can be applied willy-nilly to any biblical structure at all. Despite popular usage, for instance, the term *kingdom* in Scripture never references the New Testament Church, the comprehensive “people of God” of all ages, or the advance of common graces in the present age. Instead, the term always describes a structure in which we find

- (1) A ruler with a seat of real power and authority
- (2) A realm of definable subjects who are being ruled
- (3) A reign/rule involving the functional/legal exercise of sovereignty

Given this basic definition, the biblical term *kingdom* may be reduced in nearly every case (excepting incidental references to secular governments) to two basic options. Sometimes the term has reference to God’s sovereign rule over the whole universe generally. More frequently, however, the term has reference to God’s mediatorial kingdom on earth, ruled informally through the early chapters of biblical history by appointed men in God’s image, then formally by the Judahite kings, beginning with King David and culminating with Christ’s Millennial reign.

These notes deal primarily with the latter use of the *kingdom* motif in the Christian Scriptures. However, it behooves us to observe the features of the former kingdom before proceeding:

A. God rules in a general/universal sense over all that he has created.

#### 1. General Statements of God’s General Kingship

Psalm 145:9–17—The LORD is good to *all*; he has compassion on *all he has made*. *All you have made* will praise you, O LORD. They will tell of the glory of your **kingdom** and speak of your might, so that all men may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your **kingdom**. Your **kingdom** is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through *all generations*. The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward *all he has made*.... The eyes of *all* look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of *every living thing*. The LORD is righteous in all his ways and loving toward *all he has made* (see Pss 9, 29, 47, 66, 93, 97, 99, 145, 148).

Psalm 103:19–22—The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his **kingdom** rules over all. Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his



word. Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will. Praise the LORD, all his works everywhere in his dominion.

Jeremiah 10:6–10—No one is like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is mighty in power. Who should not revere you, O **King** of the nations? This is your due. Among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is no one like you.... For the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal **King**. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath.

1 Chronicles 29:11–12—Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O LORD, is the **kingdom**; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all.

1 Corinthians 15:124–28—Then the end will come, when [Christ] hands over his kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then **the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.**

Colossians 1:15–17—He is the image of the invisible God, the **firstborn** over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him **and for him**. He is **before** all things, and in him all things **hold together**.

Revelation 3:21—To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on **his throne** (cf. Ps 110:1–2; Heb 1).

## 2. The Scope of God’s General Kingship

- a. Angels (Pss 103:19–22; 148:2; Job 1:12)
- b. The Seas (Job 9:8; Pss 89:9; 93:2–4; 95:3–5)
- c. The Weather (Job 24:28ff; 36:26–37:24; 38:33–35; Ps 97:4; 148:8)
- d. Kings and Nations (Ps 22:28; 47:8–9; Dan 2:21; 4:17)
- e. All History (Ps 75:6–7; Dan 4:35)
- f. Animals and Plants (Ps 148:7, 9–10)
- g. Mankind (Gen 1:26–28; etc.)
- h. The Purposes of God’s General Kingship
  - The praise of the angels (Ps 103:19–22; Ps 148:2).
  - The pleasures of God in the delights of all his creatures (Pss 104:31; 145:9–17).

- The divine extraction of a proper but ultimately non-redemptive fear of God (1 Kgs 21:25–29; Jonah 3:10ff).
  - The establishment of divine justice (Ps 29; Jer 10:10ff; Lam 5:19–22).
- B. God has also delegated governing authority severally to human rulers in his image, but most especially to a line of mediatorial kings that would rule his elect nation (Israel)—a kingdom that will eventually become universal in scope.
1. The idea of man reigning in the stead of God is first seen in the Dominion Mandate of Genesis 1–2.

Genesis 1:26–28—Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and **let them rule** over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the live- stock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and **subdue** it. **Rule** over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

See also Psalm 8:5–8—You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him **ruler** over the works of your hands; you **put everything under his feet**: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

2. This idea was expanded and formalized in the Noahic Covenant of Genesis 9.

Genesis 9:1–11—Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall upon *all* the beasts of the earth and *all* the birds of the air, upon *every* creature that moves along the ground, and upon *all* the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. *Everything* that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you *everything*. But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man. As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it.” Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with *every living creature* that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—*every living creature* on earth. I establish my covenant with you.

3. The idea of a centralized ruler for God’s mediatorial kingdom is anticipated in the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants:

Genesis 17:3–8—This is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and **kings will come from you**. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of

Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God” (cf. Gen 35:11).

Deuteronomy 17:14–20— When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, “Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,” be sure to appoint over you **the king the LORD your God chooses**. He must be from among your own brothers. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite. The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, “You are not to go back that way again.” He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold.

When he takes **the throne of his kingdom**, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this **law**, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his **kingdom** in Israel.

**Note**, however, that the several authority of other kings of the earth is not suspended or rendered illegitimate by this unique development.

4. While the Kingdom began in prospect with the giving of the Law at Sinai, the early leaders of the nation were not called kings. The appellative *king* was initially reserved for God alone.

Exodus 19:5–6—Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a **kingdom of priests and a holy nation**.

Deuteronomy 33:2–5—The LORD came from Sinai and dawned from Seir upon us; he shone forth from Mount Paran; he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand. Yes, he loved his people, all his holy ones were in his hand; so they followed in your steps, receiving direction from you, when Moses commanded us a law, as a possession for the assembly of Jacob. **Thus the LORD became king in Jeshurun**, when the heads of the people were gathered, all the tribes of Israel together

5. Saul became the first human mediator of God’s nations to carry the title *king*, but he lost the right to rule to David after repeated disobedience (1 Sam 16:13–14). David and his heirs were afterward guaranteed a perpetual dynasty:

2 Samuel 7:8–16—This is what the LORD Almighty says: “I took you from the pasture and from following the flock to be ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them any more, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies. The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a **house** for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his **kingdom**.

He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish **the throne of his kingdom** forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. **Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever**” (cf. Psalms 2, 89, 110, 132).

7. The regal authority vested in David’s line will rest finally on a divine Messiah-King from David’s line.

Isaiah 9:6–7—For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the **government will be on his shoulders**. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will **reign on David’s throne** and over **his kingdom**, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and **forever**. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Luke 1:31–33—You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the **throne of his father David**, and he will **reign** over the house of Jacob forever; his **kingdom** will never end.

8. Christ receives the theocratic anointing at his baptism and the right to rule at his ascension (Matt 28:19; Luke 19:11ff), but does not immediately assume his earthly throne. Instead, the nation’s rejection of his kingship leads to a period of abeyance anticipated in the OT (so Ps 110:1; Dan 9:24–27 [?]; Amos 9:11–15). The kingdom offer is withdrawn in anticipation of a day when his people will do the fruits of it.

Matthew 21:33–44—Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. “They will respect my son,” he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, “This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.” And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Now, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?

“He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? **Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation who will produce its fruit**. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”

Acts 1:6–8—So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to **restore the kingdom to Israel**?” He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power

when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” **Note:** At this point, life on earth reverts to a Noahic arrangement in which the civil authority of the world is again vested in “ordinary” kings (“Caesar”—Matt 22:21). A *spiritual* organism (the church) commences at this time, but it has no *civil* function.

9. The theocratic kingdom will be restored at the end of the age when God’s two governments merge under the reign of our Lord Christ such that he “sits and **rules** on his **throne** and is a **priest** on his **throne**. *And there will be harmony between the two*” (Zech 6:13). This “Millennial” kingdom will be grand in its scope including features such as...

- Universal acceptance of the Gospel by its original citizens (Deut 30:1–6; Jer 31:33–34; Ezek 36:24–26; Joel 2:28, 32; Zeph 3:9; etc.) and great success of the Gospel in successive generations.
- Political echelons, including nations, strictly enforced laws, kings, and a King of kings ruling from his throne in Jerusalem.
- Religious features, including priests, a temple, sacrifices, etc.
- Social benefits, including the cessation of military conflict, true social justice, the elimination of poverty through industry, even the removal of linguistic barriers.
- Cosmic benefits in the spheres of meteorology, geography, fertility, zoology, physical health, and longevity.

- a. The Kingdom will have a Spiritual Basis.

The missing ingredient in the Mosaic Covenant that stymied its implementation throughout history will be provided in the new covenant, viz., universal salvation for all who enter the kingdom.

Deuteronomy 30:1–6—When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.

Jeremiah 31:33–34—“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD, because *they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,*” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

Ezekiel 36:24–28—I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your

idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God

Joel 2:28, 32—I will pour out my Spirit on *all flesh*.... And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.

Zephaniah 3:9—Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that *all of them* may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder.

b. The Prophetic Kingdom will have Political Substance

- (1) It will be a true monarchy: “Behold, a King shall reign” (Isa 9:6–7; 32:1; 33:22; Ps 2:6; Dan 2:44; 7:14)
- (2) It will have a Law founded on principles of perfect justice: “Righteousness and justice are the foundations of your throne” (Pss 89:14; 97:1–2; Jer 23:5; Zech 8:3).
- (3) Its founding principles will be strictly enforced: “You will rule with an iron scepter” (Ps 2:9).
- (4) There will be echelons of power.
  - Christ will be the king of kings (Rev 19:16; cf. 17:4), implying absolute sovereignty.
  - That he is king *of kings*, however, implies the continued existence of lesser authorities and nations—nations will apparently retain their identity even after they are transferred into the eternal kingdom of the Father (Dan 7:18, 22, 27 cf. 1 Cor 15:24; Rev 11:15; 22:2). [The church’s function of reigning with Christ—2 Tim 2:12—seems to put this group into the ruling class as well, though they are not mentioned in the OT prophets].
  - That the whole nation of Israel are described as a “kingdom of priests” (Exod 9:6) suggests that their primary function in the kingdom will be to be priests for the nations, representing them to God and God to them, serving in the Temple, and facilitating global worship. This was to have been their historical role as well, but they never aspired to it (Mark 11:17 cf. Isa 56:7). In this way they will perpetually fulfill the Abrahamic expectations that through them all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:3; Ps 47:1–4; 67:1–7; Isa 49:6; Zech 8:20–23).
  - The living Gentile nations will comprise the “ruled” in the Kingdom (we can’t all reign). During the era of the Kingdom, “All the nations will serve him” (Ps 72:11; cf. Zech 14:9, 20–21; Isa 2:2; Dan 2:35; 7:14). Their service, however, will be a glad submission. The Gentile nations will not even resent Israel’s privileged status, but will instead express gratitude for Israel (Ps 47:1–4; 67:1–7) for their assistance when the Gentile nations

“seek the ways of God” and participate in pilgrimages to *Jerusalem* (Isa 2:1–5; Mic 4:2; Ps 47:9).

c. The Prophetic Kingdom will fundamentally be a religious state.

(1) There will be a Theanthropic Priest-King who will unite the religious and political spheres of God’s government under one person—our Lord Christ.

Zechariah 6:12–13—Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the LORD. It is he who will build the temple of the LORD, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two.

(2) Israel will finally assume her long anticipated place as a kingdom of priests for the nations (Exod 19: 6 with Isa 61:6, 9; Jer 23:4; 33:17–22; Zeph 3:20; Zech 8:20–23).

(3) Jerusalem will be the religious center for the Kingdom (Isa 1:26; 60:14, 18; 62:3, 7; Jer 31:6; Zech 8:3; 14:16).

(4) All worship will be willingly directed to the one true and living God—true religious freedom (Zech 14:17–19; Ps 2:6–12).

(5) A temple with features and dimensions that do not match any historical building will be established (Isa 56:7; 64:11; Hag 2:6–9; Ezek 40–48), and the Shekinah will again take up residence in it (Ezek 43:1–3, 7). The

(6) Animal sacrifices will be reinstated and will serve functions similar to the Mosaic ones (see the discussion above):

d. The Prophetic Kingdom will have a robust socio-economic/welfare policy.

(1) Military Conflict Will Cease (Ps 46:9; Isa 2:4; 9:6–7), military training, standing armies, and implements of war will be decommissioned (Mic 4:3; Hos 2:18), and universal peace will be enjoyed.

(2) Social justice will prevail (Jer 33:10–11, 15; Zech 8:4–5). This will include:

- Property and labor rights (Isa 65:21–22; Amos 9:11, 14).
- Poverty relief through industry (Ps 72:1–4, 12–13; Isa 42:1–4).
- Restoration of proper family values, including proper regard of young and old (Jer 33:10–11, 15; Zech 8:4–5; Ps 126:1–2).
- Resolution of ancient racial tensions (Ezek 37:21–22; Zech 8:13, 23).
- Removal of language barriers by reversing the curse of Babel (Zeph 3:9).

(3) Environmental damage will be undone (Ps 72:16; Isa 61:4).

e. The Prophetic Kingdom will also have physical policies/features.

- (1) Beneficial changes of climate will occur (Isa 4:5–6; 30:23–26).
- (2) Beneficial geographical and geological changes will occur (Isa 30:23–26).
- (3) Meteorological changes will ensure that timely and abundant rainfall will occur worldwide (Joel 2:23; Ezek 34:26b), even in traditionally barren places (Isa 30:25; 35:6–7; 41:18), leading to the elimination of famine (Ezek 34:29).
- (4) Fertility and productivity will abound (Isa 35:1–2; Ezek 34:25, 29; Amos 9:13).
- (5) Animals will become docile (Isa 11:6–8; 65:25; Ezek 34:25; Hosea 2:18).
- (6) Disease and deformity will be eliminated (Isa 33:24; 35:5–6; 65:22).
- (7) Long life will be the norm (Isa 65:22).
- (8) Even ordinary hazards associated with clumsiness will be reduced (There Will Be Freedom from Ordinary Hazards (Ezek 34:23–31; Ps 91:10–12).

**Conclusion: Unless this very complex of features is present, the kingdom is not here.**

10. After a final rebellion, Christ will “hand over” his kingdom to his Father, the eternal state will commence, and God will be ‘all in all.’”

1 Corinthians 15:24–28—Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

## II. Preaching and Applying the Kingdom

### A. Historical Options in Church History

1. **Postmillennialists** argue that the Kingdom is a comprehensive and largely *immanent* phenomenon that is being established principally throughout the whole created realm under the principal guidance of the Christian Church. Postmillennialists DO take seriously the broad scope of the literal/material aspects of the prophetic Kingdom of Scripture (political, economic, social, industrial, agricultural, etc.), and argue that the church must take the lead in effecting progress in ALL of these spheres. The mission of the church is not merely evangelistic; it is holistic. The Church should, for instance, seek to influence the State and infiltrate every branch with Christian representatives; the Church should take the lead in philanthropy as well, addressing global poverty through benevolence, social initiatives, and education at all levels; the Church should also seek leading roles in all of the sciences, economics, ethics, and so forth.



In postmillennial thought, the Kingdom is not something that appears suddenly by supernatural fiat, but is gradually and incrementally realized. Homiletically, the implications are boundless. Everything in the Bible about the Kingdom is laced with contemporary ethical import. Literally everything we do is kingdom work.

2. **Amillennialists** argue that the Kingdom is presently and spiritually realized in the New Testament Covenant Community or the Church. The amillennialist is not unconcerned with the world at large, but the mission of the institutional Church centers principally on the household of faith. The various spheres of the Kingdom detailed in the OT are areas for all believers to bring under the tutelage of the Christian worldview. Preaching the Kingdom, then, is a matter of believers bringing every sphere of personal life under the Kingship of our Lord Christ. Unlike postmillennialism, primary concern in preaching is not on the institutional church Christianizing the whole created realm (though incidental progress toward this end may well occur as the Christian population grows and influences society). Only Christ's sudden arrival to make all things new can accomplish this. As such, the idea of transcendence remains prominent.

As we noted in the last session, some amillennialists are proponents of "Two-Kingdoms" theology. For these, homiletical application bifurcates into two carefully defined and non-overlapping spheres: believers are simultaneously citizens of two kingdoms, civil and cultic, and much care is taken to make sure that these two "kingdoms" are kept distinct. The *institutional church* has no social/political/economic mission or formal responsibilities toward those outside the community. Her mission toward those without is summarized in the Great Commission. This does not mean, however, that there is no *individual Christian* responsibility toward those without. Christians must be the very best possible exemplars in every human sphere of life. They should be the very best of neighbors, citizens, students, workers, parents, etc. Because living in this, God's *second* kingdom means I do all things with God's eye on me, and must bring everything under the Lordship of Christ, carrying out all these roles/functions must be carried out to the Glory of God. And for the 2K amillennialist, all of this constitutes a sort of kingdom work.

3. The **premillennialist** preserves the greatest level of transcendence in his understanding of the Kingdom. For a premillennialist, the present world is doomed to failure and cannot possibly recover apart from the supernatural intrusion of Christ to establish his Kingdom on Earth. As such, the premillennialist sees neither a natural/ethical realization of the Kingdom (postmillennialism), nor a spiritual one (amillennialism); the Kingdom is instead a spectacular transformation and rehabilitation of the created order by means of King Jesus's arrival to reign authoritatively and visibly on a throne on this earth, personally overseeing the sudden conformity of every sphere of life to his immediate Kingship.

But there is not unanimity on this matter. Early dispensationalists earned at some level a reputation for being uncaring. How much of this was deserved I cannot tell; still, statements like Moody's famous one that church-sponsored social action was like polishing the handrails of a sinking ship likely pushed some toward the

unwarranted conclusion that it was the duty of believers to not be nice. The implication was that since I give to the church and its causes, I have no personal/individual responsibility to help anybody else. And that's not true. *Not because it's a "kingdom" obligation, but because it's a human obligation and a neighborly obligation.* The basis for it is not Ladd's "presence of the future," but the seminal establishment by God of the dominion mandate in Genesis 2, and by the summary of God's transcendent law: to love God with all my heart and to love my neighbor as myself.

As we've noted already, Carl Henry saw this ostensible abdication of social responsibility as a cause for alarm and a reason for fundamentalist dispensationalists to have an "uneasy conscience." By withdrawing from both society and the academy, the fundamentalists were losing their influence and needed to be "awoken." The great problem, Henry argued, was the persistent dispensational reduction of the mission of the institutional church to the world to a strictly *spiritual* errand. To succeed, a "new" evangelicalism was needed—one that integrated a robust social component with its Gospel mission.

That was the point of Henry's 1947 book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. His thesis was that the evangelical church needed a *tertium quid*—a middle way between the "kingdom now" error of liberalism and the "kingdom then" error of dispensational fundamentalism. It was the latter error, however, that was Henry's whipping boy, because it "cuts the nerve of world compassion," "undercuts world relevance," and thereby "destroys the essential character of Christianity." The only credible solution was to affirm "both that the kingdom is here, and that it is not here" (pp. 53, 57).

Henry's appeal was answered formally by George Eldon Ladd, whose 1959 work *The Gospel of the Kingdom* reflects the foremost expression of his personal mission (in the words of Joel Carpenter) to "replace dispensationalism with an evangelical view of the kingdom of God and the end-times that is...more able to sustain evangelical social engagement" (*Revive Us Again*, 195).<sup>3</sup> Ladd's work immediately raised eyebrows for both its tone and sources. While savage toward his dispensational brothers, Ladd was fawning in his praise of non-evangelical alternatives, whom he cited with unswerving favor. Oscar Cullmann's dialectic approach ("inaugurated eschatology") was Ladd's triumphant answer to Henry's crisis: since God's undifferentiated kingdom both *is already* and *is not yet* supplied an indisputable basis for expanding the church's mission beyond the "spiritual mission" championed by dispensational fundamentalism. Henry and Ladd found support in the Americas within the Dutch Calvinist tradition, which had its own bout of dialectical turmoil. Among these J. Oliver Buswell stands out, but also some of the "Neo-Kuyperians" or "Neo-Calvinist." The "neo"-evangelical label and movement have since fizzled, but modern Conservative Evangelicalism has by-and-large picked up Henry's mantle.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 195.

<sup>4</sup>For direct appeals for a return to the model of Henry and Ladd, see Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*:

The rise of the progressive dispensational model, in terms of its historical impetus at least, mirrors almost exactly the situation in Henry's day. Bock and Blaising argue almost identically, in their case for abandoning traditional dispensationalism, that dispensational theology as traditionally practiced, had produced a church ambivalent to social engagement and argued the need to restore "the social ministry of the church" on the grounds that "the church is a manifestation of the future kingdom" (*Progressive Dispensationalism*, 286). They continue that the church's "connection with the coming kingdom gives the church a basis for an evangelistic participation in the political and social affairs of this world" (289–90). They conclude that as "the church becomes the workshop in which kingdom righteousness is pursued in the name of Christ, then social ministry externally becomes a call to Christ" (289).

To the point of our conference, Henry/Ladd and their disciples near and far effectively shifted the premillennial vision in their homiletical application of the kingdom to one that is actually much closer to the postmillennial approach.

#### **B. Summary Points for Preaching and Applying the Kingdom from a Dispensationalist Vantage:**

1. The fact that God sovereignly rules over all things, perfectly orchestrating every tiny detail of his eternal, all-wise plan and bringing all things to their perfect and appointed end, ought to be preached regularly and without reserve in every season of life. It is hard to imagine a circumstance in which appeals to God's sovereignty and providence cannot improve a sermon at some level. These two themes are more thoroughly and more evenly laced through the Christian Scriptures than nearly any other proposed theme.
2. The Mediatorial Kingdom is very well defined in the Scriptures, and it is not the Church. The manifold functions and spheres of the historical kingdom of Israel, much less the Millennial kingdom of our Lord Christ, do not constitute the property/mission of the institutional Church. Not only is this idea exegetically unsustainable, it is also practically beyond our reach; furthermore, any attempt to subsume them all under the umbrella of the Church's mission necessarily detracts from her stated mission in the Great Commission.
3. The laws and structures of the historical and Millennial Kingdoms are not binding on the Church, but neither are they to be regarded with contempt/ambivalence. All God's laws, however incidental, are good, and offer at the very minimum windows on God's character, concerns, and practical wisdom. There are two extremes to avoid:
  - The theonomist impulse finds normative instruction imbedded throughout all the details of Kingdom administration (most visibly mandatory Sabbath

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*The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004); Gregory Alan Thornbury, *Recovering Classic Evangelicalism: Applying the Wisdom and Vision of Carl F. H. Henry* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), and James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford, 2010).

observance and tithing, but extending into matters of politics, education, worship, economics, even diet and hygiene). This is to be avoided.

- The antinomian impulse finds no contemporary value in Kingdom structures, laws, or practices, rejecting Mosaic ideals for no reason other than that they are Mosaic. OT criminal codes are outdated; OT worship practices are to be positively avoided in the church; etc.
4. That said, it is never inappropriate to preach on ethical, social, and political matters to the degree that the Bible plainly speaks to these matters. In so doing we are, yes, informing Christian conduct in spheres outside the peculiar mission of the institutional church. This IS the Great Commission: “Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.” I’ll even go rogue here and suggest that you can preach on these topics without being awkwardly “gospel-centered” about it. If it’s in the Bible, tell your people to do it because God commanded it. It’s that simple.

Saying this is not the same, however, as expanding the church’s corporate mission and putting a line item in the Church’s budget for each of these concerns (AA meetings, programmatic charity, political lobbying and sponsorship, church-funded job fairs and accounting services, etc.) These may be important causes in which God is interested, but unless they can be credibly subsumed under the Church’s stated mission, they should be left to individual image-bearers to be carried out in the civil realm. The reason for this stance is simply that the mission of the institutional Church does not encompass every concern in life, much less coextensive with the mission of the Kingdom of God as described in either its historical or eschatological contexts. In short, the Church is not Israel and the Church is not the Kingdom.

So, yes, preach about every concern that God directly addresses in Scripture, and extrapolate even into areas that “by good and necessary consequence” are indirectly addressed by biblical principle. But this is not the same as incorporating all of these concerns into the church’s institutional mission.

5. The message of the Kingdom proper, then, is chiefly one of (1) comprehensive and (2) eschatological hope. By the latter I mean that it fills us with confidence that God will one day, by an act (or, better, by a series of acts) of his sovereign and supernatural power make all things right. If you take nothing from this session, I hope you feel the need to restore the overwhelming transcendence of the Kingdom message in an era where prevailing sentiments about the Kingdom are laced with immanence. God will suddenly appear, and we will win. Satan will be incarcerated and this very earth will be restored to us.

That being said, however, there IS a comprehensiveness about Kingdom hope that extends to immanent, even material ends. The Earthly Kingdom and succeeding New Earth will be places where we can, at long last, carry out successfully the whole dominion mandate without any of the impediments of depravity—we won’t simply float about singing; we will successfully carry out God’s original and broad plan for humanity...but only AFTER God breaks in and takes the earth back in an unmitigated, raw act of supernatural sovereignty.

# Kingdom, Covenant, and the Mission of the Church

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## Session Two: Preaching to the Church About the New Covenant

\*\*\*In the following I am indebted to Roy E. Beacham, “The Church Has No Legal Relationship to or Participation in the New Covenant,” in *Dispensational Understanding of the New Covenant: Three Views*, ed. Mike Stallard (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 2012), 107–44.

### I. Identifying the New Covenant

Of all the named covenants in the Scriptures, only Noah’s covenant is universal. Noah’s covenant is made, according to its own terms, “with Noah and all his descendants after him” and “with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth,” and “with all generations yet to come,” and is “everlasting” in duration (Gen 9:8–17). All the other covenants are expressly and explicitly Jewish in their scope. In answer to Paul’s deep concern about “his brothers, those of his own race, the people of Israel,” we discover that the future of Israel is assured in part because “theirs is the adoption as sons; *theirs are the covenants*, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises” (Rom 9:34). Of all of Israel’s covenants, none sport greater specificity in terms of nature, named parties, details and timing, and oath than the New Covenant, and its provisions are both extensive and specific. One might even make the case that the new covenant is the central theme of the OT prophets. An overwhelming majority of the biblical detail on the new covenant is found here, so it is impossible to speak credibly of that covenant without starting here.

Excursus: It is before we even begin, then, that we find our first homiletical conundrum, an exegetical/hermeneutical one. It is quite common in modern evangelical discussions to begin with the NT data on this topic, and most critically, to use that NT data to decisively cancel the OT data. For instance...

- Since the new covenant is mentioned in conjunction with one of the church ordinances (1 Cor 11:25), Israel must have relinquished ownership or at least partial ownership of the new covenant.
- Since Paul is a minister of a new covenant (2 Cor 3:6), the label “new covenant people of God” is attributable principally to the Christian Church—irrespective of the fact that the OT, dozens of times, identifies future Israel as that new community.
- Since Pentecost is described in Acts 2:17–21 in terms drawn from a passage on the new covenant, Pentecost marks the inauguration of the new covenant.

It is conceded that these texts are extraordinarily difficult ones, and we will need to deal with each with painstaking due diligence. But here’s the thing: this is a problem not only for those who disagree with the majority evangelical interpretations of the NT data. Rarely do we see

appeals for due diligence in OT hermeneutics when the NT data seems to contradict OT texts. Instead, it is almost always concluded that whenever hermeneutical antinomies occur, the NT interprets the OT, or more accurately, the NT reinterprets or even cancels the OT entirely. For instance, we rarely see arguments such as...

- Since the new covenant commences with an oath sworn by the regathered factions of Judah/Israel (Jer 50:4–5; Hos 2:18–23; Zech 13:9), the NT Church cannot be the new covenant community of God.
- Since the new covenant commences with the universal salvation of all surviving Israelites (Jer 31:31–34), then the new covenant must still be future.
- Since Joel 2 anticipates, *before* the implementation of the new covenant, a militarily explosive regathering of Israel so widespread that the “sun will be darkened and the moon turned to blood,” then the realization of the new covenant involves something other than or at least more than what the Church is currently enjoying.

Please don't hear me saying that these decisions are easy ones or that dispensational conclusions are unassailable, but rather that these decisions are hard for all parties, and any approach that dismisses the need for diligence in interpreting the OT *with the same rigor and using the same rules that we use in the NT* is a flawed approach.

#### A. The Principal OT Texts:

**Deuteronomy 30:1–6**—When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.

**Jeremiah 31:33–34**—“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD, because *they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,*’” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

**Ezekiel 36:24–28**—I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to

follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God

**Joel 2:11ff**—The LORD thunders at the head of his army; his forces are beyond number, and mighty are those who obey his command. The day of the LORD is great; it is dreadful. Who can endure it? “Even now, therefore,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.”... Who knows? He may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God.

Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly. Let them say, “Spare your people, O LORD. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’”

Then the LORD will be jealous for his land and take pity on his people. The LORD will reply to them: “I am sending you grain, new wine and oil, enough to satisfy you fully; never again will I make you an object of scorn to the nations.

“I will drive the northern army far from you, pushing it into a parched and barren land, with its front columns going into the eastern sea and those in the rear into the western sea. Surely the LORD has done great things. Be not afraid, O wild animals, for the open pastures are becoming green. The trees are bearing their fruit; the fig tree and the vine yield their riches. Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God for he has given you the autumn rains in righteousness. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains, as before. The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil. You will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you; never again will my people be shamed. Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the LORD your God, and that there is no other; never again will my people be shamed.

And *after all this*, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And everyone among the survivors whom the LORD calls on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem will be saved.

**Zephaniah 3:9**—Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that *all of them* may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder.

See also Pss 45:2; 98:2; 145:8–13; Isa 12:1–3; 32:–2; 51:11; 52:7–10; Isa 55:1–7; 60:18; 61:2–3; 61:10; Jer 23:6; 30:11–12, 17–18; 31:12, 19; Jer 32:40; Ezek 16:60–63; Mic 7:19; Zech 12:10.

## B. The Nature of the New Covenant

### 1. The Covenant Types

- a. **Parity Covenant:** A mutual and bilateral agreement among social equals that reciprocally binds both parties to some course of action. By his very nature, God cannot enter into such an agreement with any of his creatures, so there are no divine/human covenants of this type found in the Scriptures.
- b. **Promissory/Royal Grant:** A unilateral and unconditional self-obligation of a suzerain to a course of action on behalf of his vassals. In this kind of covenant, only the suzerain “enters” the agreement. This is reflected in the Noahic, Abrahamic, and Davidic Covenants.
- c. **Suzerainty Treaty:** While an effectively unilateral imposition by a suzerain to a course of action by his vassals, in this kind of covenant the *vassals* were obliged, under oath, to agree to the terms of the treaty. It was bilateral. In most ANE suzerainty treaties, the suzerain’s responsibilities, while occasionally delineated, were not *truly* obligatory. This is where the biblical idea differs. While disobedience might result in the invocation of curses and postponement of fulfillment, there could never be complete abrogation. In the biblical suzerainty covenants, the Suzerain also bound himself to a course of action. This kind of covenant is reflected in the Mosaic and New Covenants.

**A Note on Conditionality:** Some scholars speak of suzerainty covenants as “conditional” because they are dependent *for its establishment* upon human acceptance of its terms. In this sense the Mosaic and New Covenants are conditional. This should not be construed to mean, however, that these covenants could be abrogated if Israel failed to keep their terms. The acceptance/ratification of the covenant was “conditional”; however, *once in place*, both parties were perpetually bound to its terms. There were conditions imbedded in these covenants, but success/failure to meet these terms resulted not in the cancellation of the covenant, but experience, respectively, of the blessing and curse clauses contained in its terms. The totality of the covenant is unconditional.

## 2. The Formal Nature of the New Covenant

### a. The Establishment of the Covenant Parties

In all covenants (ancient and modern), the covenant begins with a naming of the parties bound by the covenant. In the case of the New Covenant, the named parties are relentlessly defined as (1) Yahweh and (2) the reunited “houses” of Israel and Judah, long historically estranged, but reunited in the eschaton (Jer 31:31; Ezek 37:15ff; etc.).

### b. The Impossibility of Amendment/Addition of Parties/Terms

History tells us that while deceitful covenant-makers sometimes reneged on their covenant agreements when they were powerful enough to do so, covenants were ordinarily resistant to emendation, and in many cases could not be amended at all. Evidence of this notion can be seen in the Scriptures on at least two occasions:

(1) In Deuteronomy 30—the Mosaic Covenant could not be amended to soften its



impossible terms, and the language of permanence does not allow it to simply be cancelled. The only solution to its unachievable nature was to imbed within it a new covenant that annuls the old by completing it.

- (2) A similar notion can be observed in Xerxes's response to Esther's plea. He could not cancel his sworn decree that Haman's people could annihilate Mordecai's people; however, he could issue a second sworn decree that incentivized Mordecai's people (and anyone he could recruit) to mount a counter-offensive.

By implication, *new parties or terms for a covenant may not be introduced without formal, separately sworn covenant oaths*. In this way the new covenant is much like contemporary formal covenants, most prominently (1) the marriage covenant and (2) the last will and covenants of the deceased.

c. The Indispensability of the Oath

While ANE covenants were sometimes solemnized or rendered emphatic with a sacrifice (or the death of a drohritus, which is not technically a sacrifice), the sacrifice was incidental to the primary inaugurating mechanism: the oath. The Davidic Covenant had no sacrifice at all; the Abrahamic Covenant featured a drohritus, but the animals involved were killed a full day before the covenant was enacted.

There is overwhelming support in the literature for the oath as the singular, indispensable, inaugurating feature of ANE covenants. A covenant cannot go into effect *until all the named parties swear to its terms*. The modern comparison point is the signature(s) affixed to formal contracts/covenants.

**It is for this reason, principally, that I argue (what I said earlier that almost no one does) that since the new covenant begins with an oath sworn by the regathered factions of Judah/Israel (Jer 50:4–5; Hos 2:18–23; Zech 13:9), the NT Church cannot be a new covenant community of God (much less THE new covenant community).**

3. A Sampling of the Provisions of the New Covenant:

- a. The hearts of *every* single Israelite will be changed (Jer 31:33; 32:40; Isa 59:21; Ezek 36:24–25).

NOTE: This provision cannot be read to say that only those who are rendered regenerate can be a part of the new covenant (a common interpretation esp. among Reformed Baptists), but that the new covenant will trigger the comprehensive regeneration of all living Israelites.

- b. Ethnic Israel will repent and become obedient (Ezek 16:60–63; 36:27).  
 c. Ethnic Israel will be forgiven on account of the old covenant with Abram (Ezek 16:60 cf. Jer 31:34).

- d. God will regather Ethnic Israel in the land where they will live together in safety (Jer 32:41–44; 50:4–5; Is 49:8–13; 54:10, 17; Ezek 34:28–31; 37:24–25).
- e. The animals will enter into the covenant (Ezek 34:25; Hosea 2:18), as will the weather and agriculture (Ezek 34:26–29; 36:30).
- f. The blessings will be permanent, never to be reversed (Isa 54:9–10; 55:3; 59:21; 61:8; Jer 31:35–37; Ezek 34:28–29; 37:26–28).
- g. Gentiles will respond favorably to God’s blessings on Israel and stream to her to employ her priestly services (Isa 2:2–4; 42:6–8; 60–61; Jer 3:17–18; 4:2; 16:19–21; 33:8–9) as secondary beneficiaries of the new covenant.

It is here argued that *none* of the provisions *distinctive to* the new covenant have ever been realized: Israel has not been restored in safety to the land; wholesale conversion among the Jews has not occurred; the nations are not approving of the nation of Israel; there have been no dramatic zoological, horticultural, meteorological, or geological changes in the world; etc. It is true, of course that God is regenerating and sanctifying his people, but these actions are not *distinctive to* the new covenant.

#### **Excursus: What Is New About the New Covenant?**

The newness of the new covenant is not absolute. In fact, the point in calling it “new” draws attention to the fact that it is much like the old covenant, but with necessary improvements that render it better. The great question to be decided is the identity of what is new and the identity of what is old. Note the following options:

- Some suggest that the newness is tied to the *kind* of covenant. The Mosaic Covenant was a conditional suzerainty/vassal covenant the terms of which Israel tried to but could not keep, while the new covenant was a unilateral covenant whose terms God personally effected through the imputed righteousness of Christ. As we noted above, however, there are several tensions with this understanding: (1) Both the Mosaic and New Covenants are established **bilaterally** (Exod 19 cf. Jer 50:4–5; Hos 2:18–23; Zech 13:9); (2) both covenants expect participation of regenerate Israel (Jer 31:33; 32:40; Ezek 36:25–27; 37:1–14).
- Others (mostly older) dispensationalists suggest that the new feature of the New Covenant is the fact of regeneration and/or permanent indwelling. This theory likewise fails on multiple counts: (1) Regeneration is not only theologically necessary in all dispensations, it is clearly described in the text of the OT (Deut 10:16; cf. John 3:10). (2) Regeneration is also a concept common to both covenants (Deut 30:6; Ezek 36:26). (3) Permanent indwelling is likewise not only theologically essential to the sanctification process in all dispensations, it is clearly described in the OT (Num 27:18; Gen 41:38). (4) Finally, even if we concede for sake of argument that regeneration and indwelling are absent in the OT, we still find them in the NT epistles, long before the rest of the new covenant blessings are realized by national Israel.
- A more promising “new” factor is universal regeneration for all those who are rightly related to the new covenant. Under the old covenant, one might be rightly

related without being a believer (in fact, all male babies were rightly related to the covenant a mere 8 days after birth, but this did not ensure faith). On the other hand, every man who enters into right relationship with the new covenant is necessarily converted (at least at the outset of the Millennium).

- The last and most satisfying explanation is the universal efficacy of the new covenant. The Mosaic Covenant provided maintenance for a fallen world; the new covenant provides a cure, in the vicarious obedience of its “testator,” for the whole created realm. The new covenant effects the forgiveness and final expiation for sin, restoration of the whole created order (zoological, horticultural, geological, meteorological, etc.). It also supplies universal, special revelation for the world of mankind, and ushers in a new era of abundant Spirit activity.

## II. Homiletical Considerations” Relating the Church to the New Covenant

Clearly the Church sustains something of a relationship with the New Covenant (Matt 26:28; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 7:22; 8:6–13; 9:15; 10:15–18, 29; 12:24; and 13:20). With one notable exception (discussed below), biblical theological models have tended to answer the question of the relationship of the Church to the New Covenant in exactly the same way that they answer the question of the Church’s relationship to the Kingdom. Note the following options:

- A. Covenant Theology regards the passages listed above as proof that the Church has *replaced* Israel.
  1. For Amillennialists, the new covenant is being fulfilled *spiritually* in the Church. Believers are immediate recipients of the innately spiritual blessings; all others are metaphorical in application. The new covenant contains no material promises related to the “land”; other meteorological/geological/agricultural benefits are rendered spiritual in application (*showers of blessing*; bringing in the sheaves *of converted souls*; streams in the desert *as devotional nuggets*).
  2. Postmillennialists generally view the new covenant benefits as literal, to a fault. Many of the Puritans, one may be surprised to discover, were obsessed with Jewish evangelism, understanding correctly that a mass conversion of the Jews was necessary to fulfilling the terms of the new covenant (Christ doesn’t do this suddenly by his appearance in Jerusalem; it’s up to the Church to accomplish this). With the rise of Modernism (with its anti-supernaturalism and extreme immanence), the material terms of the covenant increasingly displaced this evangelistic vision and became the substance of the Social Gospel. More recently, the ideas of Christian Reconstruction, Theonomy, and Christian Nationalism represent broad revivals of the postmillennial approach.
- B. Ever since the dialectical period gave us inaugurated eschatology in the 1940s, there has been a tendency to see the new covenant as partially fulfilled. But expressions of this approach vary greatly.
  1. Historical Premillennialists argue that the Church is the New Covenant People of God

and recipients currently of a limited expression of covenant benefits. These benefits will dramatically increase during the Messianic Age.

2. Progressive dispensationalism likewise argues for a *partial fulfillment* of the new covenant in the Church today, on similar grounds to the preceding. The difference is that they refuse to abandon national Israel in the fulfillment of the new covenant. The church currently fulfills the new covenant as a full participant; national/ethnic Israel must and will fulfill the new covenant in the eschaton.

C. Traditional Dispensationalists have not all been of the same mind on this matter:

1. J. N. Darby suggested that the church does not participate *at all* in the new covenant. This is the plainest option when viewed from the standpoint of an OT Jew, but raises several NT questions (1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:6; etc.). For more modern expressions of this understanding and answers to these objections see John Master and Roy Beacham.
2. Confounded by the use of new covenant language in NT discussions of the Church (which seemed totally unrelated to the OT descriptions), many classical dispensationalists (Scofield and Chafer) argued that there must be two new covenants, one for Israel, the other for the church. This view is held by very few today (but see Ryrie's return to this position in *Dispensationalism* [1995] from his earlier position in *Dispensationalism Today* [1965]). This mirrors their similar approach to the kingdom as having two distinct (and only loosely related) "forms": a mystery form and a Millennial form.
3. A persistent group of traditional dispensationalists (starting with John McGahey in 1959, but expanding to include representatives such as Homer Kent, Rod Decker, and Bruce Compton) have been exceptional to the rule of treating the new covenant and kingdom disparately. These understand the new covenant to have been enacted (but not fulfilled), and on the basis of that enactment, God allows the NT Church to prospectively enjoy certain spiritual benefits of the new covenant despite the continued recalcitrance of national Israel.

The reasons for this disparity stem from seemingly anomalous NT use of new covenant language in ways that seem to include the church. These anomalous are rare, but cannot be overlooked. The following is a brief answer to four concerns frequently raised (for greater detail, consult Beacham):

- Christ's appeal to the new covenant at the last supper must be viewed in its context as a Passover meal eaten in the midst of discussions about the kingdom. In it he announces that the wine was emblematic (dare I say typological) of the blood of Christ that was preliminary to the new covenant oath and the source of its newness. But as Darby routinely suggested, the blood did more than precipitate a covenant. It was also poured out for many for the remission of sins—*of believers in every age*. Until this point, the exact means of our redemption had been cloaked in some mystery, but now any confusion has been stripped away. To move from these two observations that the sacrifice enacts the covenant (which historically is never true) and that the gathered disciples are now constituted the new covenant people of God seems a stretch.

- Paul’s self-identification as a “minister of [the] new covenant” (2 Cor 3:6) seems definitive until one observes that covenant is inexplicably anarthrous. This does not eliminate all possibility that he is referring to THE new covenant, but other explanations emerge. Either Paul is “minister of *a* new covenant,” or, more likely of anarthrous constructions, “minister of a new-covenant-like arrangement,” stressing the quality of his ministry. This, coupled with Paul’s abundant use of analogies/metaphors in the immediate context at a minimum cast doubt on the conclusion that the church is certainly defined here as the new covenant people of God.
- While it is impossible to walk through every reference to the new covenant in the book of Hebrews, it is possible to look at the big picture the author is painting. Writing to ethnic Jews tempted to return to the futility of the old covenant, the author of Hebrews lays out, in extensive terms, the need to embrace the promise of the new covenant as an intrinsically superior ideal. It is notable that he never announces the new covenant as presently inaugurated (the one passage often cited to that effect [8:6], uses a perfect passive form that may indicate past accomplishment [“it has been enacted”], but may also have no time referent at all [“it is enacted on better promises”]—so NIV, ESV). As such, I disagree with those who see this book as announcing the *Church* as a *presently realized* phenomenon.

**Whether or not the hearer agrees with these assessments, it is incumbent upon every preacher of the new covenant to generate answers to the “problem” of the new covenant, paying attention not only to readings in the NT that are hermeneutically anomalous to the OT presentation, but also to OT readings that are anomalous with prevailing conclusions about the NT presentation of the new covenant.**

### **Conclusion:**

In many ways we have in this last session a situation almost identical to that of the previous one. Our application of the new covenant flows necessarily from biblical theological factors that inform our understanding of what the new covenant is and when it is realized.

I believe I can say safely that the nearly ubiquitous characterization of the Christian Church as the “new covenant people of God” cannot be squared successfully with dispensational theology. Regathered eschatological Israel is THE new covenant people of God. The Church is at best one of several new covenant peoples (PD), or perhaps a people participating proleptically in benefits that will one day flow in great abundance upon Israel’s neighbors as she functions as a kingdom of priests for the nations who will, in that day, stream steadily to Israel for these benefits.

In other words, the preaching and application of the new covenant tends to be, in dispensational thought, somewhat abstract and distant. But if I may suggest it, that may be one of the biggest things missing in modern preaching: sermon takeaways that rather than giving us something to do, give us something to think about, to imagine, to wonder, and to hope. In a word, we need more other-worldliness in our preaching—and preaching eschatological themes like the Kingdom and the New Covenant, directing the imaginations of audiences, young and old (and perhaps especially the very young and the very old) is one of the best ways to get there.