

REFLECTIONS ON THE KINGDOM OF GOD

CARL F. H. HENRY*

The OT depicts God as Israel's superlative king and as sole sovereign of the universe and of history. Although it does not use the expression "kingdom of God," the whole of reality distinct from God gains its meaning and worth in relation to God's royal power and rule.

That God's conscious will rules and overrules all existence is a theme that pervades the Scriptures. He is depicted not only as the King of heaven but also as "the King of all the earth" (Ps 47:7), "the King of all the peoples of the earth" (Dan 4:34), "King of the nations" (Jer 10:7). The NT refers to him as "the great King" (Matt 5:35), as "King of the ages" (Rev 15:3), as "the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God" (1 Tim 1:17) and as "the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (6:15).

The idea of God as King did not first arise as a reflex of Israel's institution of a human king, because that development is depicted as an outrage that Yahweh at best tolerates. Generations earlier the Hebrews, when delivered from Egypt through the Red Sea, acknowledged that "the LORD is King for ever and ever" (Exod 15:18). Moses refers to Yahweh expressly as King (Deut 33:5). He that is worshiped in Zion is, in the words of Isaiah, judge of the whole world, including "the kings on the earth below" (Isa 24:21). The exodus presaged a future and even greater deliverance, one that would manifest the kingdom of God under the rule of the divine messianic representative (Isa 51:9-11; Hos 2:16-25).

The Bible nowhere settles for a merely general divine superintendency of the universe and of history. Everything is related to God's concrete plan and purpose and dominion. At the same time one exaggerates the historical factualities if one thinks that Israel's kings ruled without deviation in Yahweh's stead and implemented a theocracy that wholly manifested the law of Yahweh in their own laws. God the King was indeed manifest in them, so that in a special sense these earthly rulers could even be called "gods" (John 10:34). But Yahweh wielded his own power over and above them. God rules not only as a king rules, but he rules as the supreme King, the only true King, alone can rule.

In line with the progressive nature of historical revelation the OT portrayal oscillates between an emphasis on Yahweh's already existing kingly rule and on his rule in progress toward its yet future climactic goal. In the NT the kingdom (*basileia*) combines these two emphases, speaking at once

*Carl Henry is an author and lecturer living at 3824 N. 37th Street, Arlington, Virginia 22207.

of God's ongoing supremacy over and transcendent confrontation of all the universe and of the concrete historical significance of the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Man, the coming Savior of the world. The incarnation of the *Logos* links the transcendent and the historical in ways that force upon us an exposition of God's kingdom in terms of both the "already" and the "not yet," whether we have in view the kingdom of Heaven, the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of Christ. Karl Barth has put the matter well: "The *basileia* is here, and yet it is not here; it is revealed, yet it is also hidden; it is present, but always future; it is at hand, indeed in the very midst, yet it is constantly expected, being still, and this time seriously, the object of the petition: Thy Kingdom come."¹

God rules in a governance whose movement from yesterday to tomorrow is always complete and yet is always also a looming, imminent event toward which everything is hurrying. The goal of God's kingdom is to subordinate all things to him as the creator, judge and redeemer. Of no other kingdom can this be said. The secondary kingdoms cannot compromise or imperil the divine rule, even if and when they project themselves as contrary to God and his kingdom. We may even say that God alone rules, since no sinister power can dislodge or supersede him. The pride of earthly world rulers is always misplaced.

The NT combines this emphasis on God's universal kingship with another no less important OT theme, that of the Messiah of the house of David, the Son of Man, the Savior-King who is to come in the eschatological future. God's transcendent supremacy is thereby linked with the prophetic expectation that God's rule will be established in this world under the Messiah-King.

To these representations the Dead Sea scrolls affix a distinguishing addition: The Qumran community seems to have believed that the kingdom was fulfilled among them and that they already shared in eschatological salvation. The gospels differ notably from this belief of the Qumran community. To be sure, the gospels emphasize that the kingdom of God has in a carefully nuanced sense appeared, and they herald that appearance. But only with the arrival of the God-man Jesus of Nazareth does the divine King walk this earth. Even then he is at first unrecognized by those to whom he came (John 1:10-11). By his contemporaries he is called "king of the Jews" and is presumed to have a pitifully small sovereignty alongside Near Eastern autocrats of his own day and especially alongside Caesar in Rome. His paltry, bush-league kingdom of Judah was scarcely to be compared with palatial past empires like Assyria and Babylonia and Persia and Egypt whose forces had long since swept over Palestine and reduced it to merely a way-station to larger military objectives. Even as a Jewish king he seems so dwarfed by comparison with past Israelite rulers like Solomon in his vaunted glory that nobody would suspect that he was a world-king.

¹ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958) 3.3.156.

Mark 1:14–15 summarizes Jesus' preaching as the proclamation of God's kingdom: "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" The waiting period was over, and God was in a climactic way initiating his royal salvific work on earth. Luke 4:21 tells of Jesus beginning his ministry by reading Isaiah 61 and declaring that passage vitally fulfilled. Jesus' miraculous works are depicted as manifestations of the kingdom of God (Matt 11:5; cf. Isa 35:5–6). Jesus' teaching was centered in the inbreaking kingdom of God, which will bring all other kingdoms to a standstill. That kingdom was already present and manifest in his teaching, his works, and above all his person.

Yet Israel's expectations of the one on whose shoulders the government would rest took an essentially political turn, one that assimilated the prophetic God-like ruler to an alien conception of the coming kingdom of God. The popular notion of the kingdom of God diminished, politicized and compromised what prophetic salvation intended.

The messianic representations of the OT far transcended what this materialistic kingdom-expectation implied. The Son of David, we are told in Ps 110:2–4, is both priest and king. The "Son of Man," depicted in Dan 7:13–14 as bearing sovereign authority and power, brings the world powers to their end—indeed, terminates world power as such. This coming King will rule not humanity only but a renewed cosmos also, conquering sin and inaugurating perpetual peace and justice. Although kingship is not the only motif for OT eschatology, all prophecy seems nonetheless to culminate in the expectation of the King who steps into history from above and in the good news that to penitent moral rebels God grants life in his perfect kingdom. This triumphant spiritual climax is at the heart of NT anticipation also: "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign forever and ever" (Rev 11:18). God is universal sovereign. The finite sphere, created and preserved by God, is also judged by him and through him alone can share in redemption.

There is no room here to relativize and blur the distinction between earthly reality and history on the one hand and the transcendence of God and his Christ on the other. Created nature is not divine nature, is not God externalized, nor is history reducible to an emanation or evolution of divinity. The reduction of God's kingdom to myth by speculative philosophers who invest nature and history with divinity merely exchanges the reality for false and counterfeit views of history and the cosmos. The most consistent alternative to the Biblical view of God's kingdom is the purposelessness and meaninglessness of all life and existence.

The reign of Christ is not simply one reign alongside others, whether that of Alexander the Great or of Caesar. It is the truly incomparable kingdom that transcends all others. Anchored in divine election from all eternity, it is the one kingdom in relation to which the destiny of all mankind and of all the nations turns, the kingdom that is grounded indestructibly in the sovereign will of the Lord of the cosmos and of history. The kingdom of God is the fulfillment and finale toward which all God's ways

and works point. It is the only kingdom that decisively attests that life is more ultimate than death, that mercy can outreach the arenas of sin and guilt, and that the sphere of God is greater than the realms of hell. It signals the satisfaction of all legitimate human need, the triumph of divine mercy, humanity living life fit for eternity, the homecoming of the renewed community of God. It is the kingdom that cannot be frustrated by the puppet kingdoms of Satan but that explains them for what they really are. It is the enduring kingdom amid others that rise only to have their half day and then perish.

We have noted that the coming of Jesus of Nazareth advances the prophetic promise of the eschatological kingdom into the sphere of fulfillment—if not total fulfillment, yet nonetheless realization in a crucially significant way. We shall note later that Jesus himself insisted that God's kingdom as he inaugurates it has a fuller future manifestation for which he charged his disciples to pray "Thy kingdom come" and central to which would be his second advent. Yet the pivotal importance of the incarnation is in no way dwarfed, for—in the words of Heb 1:2—the manifestation in Jesus initiates the "last days."

Jesus in his own person is the embodied sovereignty of God. He lives out that sovereignty in the flesh. He manifests the kingdom of God by enthroning the creation-will of God and demonstrating his lordship over Satan. Jesus conducts himself as Lord and true King, ruling over human hearts, ruling over demons, ruling over nature at its fiercest, ruling over sickness, conquering death itself. With the coming of Jesus the kingdom is not merely immanent; it gains the larger scope of incursion and invasion. Jesus points to his release of the victims of Satan, and to his own devastation of demons and the demonic, as attesting that "the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Mark 12:28). He reveals God's royal power in its salvific activity.

The synoptics' "the time is fulfilled" and Paul's "in the fulness of time" (Gal 4:4) suggest a definitive change of situation in respect to God's historical presence and rule. The kingdom's coming would be manifest in the ministry of Jesus, not least of all in his death and resurrection (Mark 8:31; cf. 9:31; 10:45). His earthly life climaxes in his resurrection as the crucified One and in God's consequent appointment of "a day in which God will" by him "judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:30–31).

For Christians the kingdom of God would be a barren concept apart from the presence and centrality of Messiah Jesus, the crucified and risen Redeemer. He is the King who, incredible as it may seem, is at the same time the suffering servant, our substitute, and is so precisely as the sinless crucified One. He is the King who proffers the forgiveness of sin without which there is no eternal life. It is with Jesus that we must ultimately deal in all our comings and goings. Jesus stands bound to the Father as the sinless Son in whom the Father is well pleased. He is the One who in his own person is the kingdom wherein God is reconciled to the world and the world to God. He is the King who ranges his power against whatever and whomever would despoil the cosmos, against all forces that would op-

press the helpless and disadvantage the poor. He is the King who in all his words and acts makes it his mission to protect God's people against all that would destroy him and them.

Only through Christ's kingship does the possibility arise in fact for human beings to become kings in a fully moral sense: "We shall rule with him" (2 Tim 2:12). Genuine kingship arises through fulfilling one's role and function in Christ's kingdom. When Jesus instituted the last supper as Judas was about to betray him, Jesus said to the disciples: "I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:37).

Yet Christ's kingdom is to reach its supreme climax in the goal of the messianic age, the eternal kingdom of God. Believing Gentiles and a redeemed remnant of Jewry will through divine salvation and reconciliation then conspicuously transcend the Jewish-Gentile barrier. The apostolic world-witness that Jesus mandated to "begin in Jerusalem" (Acts 1:7), even as before his crucifixion he had dispatched disciples first to the Jews, now reaches a transracial recognition of Jesus the King to whom all power in heaven and earth was given (Matt 28:18)—given by the Godhead, of course, in whose triunity Jesus shares as the One who has taken away our sin and completes our redemption. The world-girdling mandate ("Go ye therefore into all the world") is relayed "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (28:19). Before they teach all nations "to obey everything" that Jesus commanded (28:20), the disciples are first themselves to tarry in Jerusalem to "wait for the gift my Father promised" (Acts 1:4), the pentecostal manifestation of the Spirit.

The terminology "kingdom of Heaven" is more than a literary alternative to "kingdom of God" motivated by a devout reluctance to use the name of Yahweh. It reminds us that there is more to created reality than the space-time universe that science probes. The Bible identifies heaven and earth in distinction from the Creator and Preserver and the Judge of all. God created both the heavens and the cosmos (Pss 33:6; 96:5; 102:25). The Bible speaks of "the host of heaven"—of angels and other spirit-creatures. The earthly world is largely visible, the heavenly is invisible. The earth is subject to man's dominion and, within limits, the sky and outer space as well, but not so the heavenly realities. God is ruler of the heavens and the earth, of the supercosmic and cosmic environment, both of which are to be differentiated from the reality of God. The kingdom of God comes to us from this heavenly realm, and hence it is appropriately depicted as the kingdom of Heaven, as Matthew's gospel routinely designates it. Yet Matthew exercises this semantic option not simply to shroud the name and personality of God, for in that case would Matthew in some places have referred intimately to the kingdom of the Father (Matt 13:48; 26:29), and would he not (in 12:28; 21:31, 43) have entirely avoided speaking of the kingdom of God?

God's kingdom is first in heaven, then on earth: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). It is on its way to earth—first in

covenant promise, then in prophetic expectation, next in the King's entry into history as the messianic Son of Man. Then, through the resurrection of the crucified One, there rises on earth the new regenerate society whose risen Head is now already ensconced in the eternal order, who confers upon the body of the redeemed the powers and virtues that anticipate the age to come, and who presently seeks through the body to extend his triumph over injustice and evil so that the moral obedience that prevails in heaven may likewise prevail on earth.

In heaven all the powers cast their crowns before God, all creatures sing his praises and do his will. They exemplify what earth will be like when God's will is done here as it is already done there. All heaven is interested in this development on planet earth. In heaven the last vestiges of the kingdom of Satan are already shattered, and the coming of the kingdom of God will banish them on earth also. After being tempted by Satan in the wilderness Jesus comes to Galilee, declaring that "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" (or "has drawn nigh"). The irruption of the kingdom of heaven into earthly history is immanent. "If I by the Spirit of God cast out devils," says Jesus, "then is the kingdom of God come upon you" (Matt 12:28). The declaration that the kingdom of God is "in your midst" (Luke 17:21) confirms that Jesus' earlier message to the beleaguered John the Baptist was intended to suggest the dawning of eschatological salvation: "Tell John . . . I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven" (10:18).

From and through the superterrestrial kingdom of Heaven Christ came to his cosmic creation, from a kingdom where angelic revolt had already been repelled and its rebellious creatures doomed without hope of redemption, to this world where sinful humanity's possibility of decision for Christ remains in force and where followers of Jesus may gain assurance that their names are already inscribed in heaven and their reward is already assured (Luke 10:20; Heb 12:23; 1 Pet 1:4). It is heaven that opens when Stephen the martyr sees the Son of Man standing at God's right hand (Acts 7:56). Heaven is the throne of the omnipresent God (Ps 2:5), his special place, even as Jesus instructed that we address him in prayer: "Our Father in heaven" (Matt 6:9). It is the "there" from whence the *Logos* came to assume human nature (John 3:13) and where the risen Christ now seated at God's right hand exercises divine authority.

On the frontiers between the unregenerate world and the kingdom of God the Christian community is entrenched to proclaim the gospel and to clarify the dual destinies that confront the whole human race. The Church is not the kingdom but prefigures the kingdom as its nearest approximation in the collective history of humanity. In daily association with the coming King, this new society of now-regenerate moral rebels is entrenched on the Rock against which the gates of hell cannot prevail. In Christ the kingdom's frontiers are being extended, not as fixed boundaries but as continually reflected in the thoughts and actions of a new society. Not by the new society's political or cultural activism per se but only through obedience to the ruling head of the regenerate Church does the

body fulfill its mission. Instead of contriving to impose theonomy on a rebellious world, which in any event is dying in its sins, the Church should strive rather to be a radiant Christocracy wherein Christ rules the obedient new society by the Scriptures through the Holy Spirit. Where the Spirit enlivens the new community there the kingdom's incursion is manifest, transforming once ungodly individuals into a holy fellowship. The kingdom is a community-nourishing reality in which the people of God share citizenship by invitation of the King.

To this spiritual vitality the apostle Paul points when he declares that the kingdom consists of "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17) and writes of "the fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22). The kingdom of God is present in the Church in the presence of Jesus Christ its invisible Head. It is present in the Holy Spirit's dynamic, transforming power in the lives of saints, who remain sinners despite their best resolves and yet who are united in a deep love for God and for each other in a community that anticipates a deepening moral communion as the kingdom takes visible form.

The notion that the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of God are rival kingdoms is precluded by the Pauline reference to "the kingdom of Christ and of God" (Eph 5:5). To be sure, Jesus speaks of "my kingdom" (Luke 22:30; John 18:36) and accepts the reference by the thief on the cross to "your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). Yet Paul, we are told, preached "the kingdom of God" and taught "things that concern the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 28:31). The importance of this conjunction is anticipated at the outset of the gospels, where the "nighness" of the kingdom of God is correlated with the preaching of repentance in the context of fulfillment of the OT promises (Mark 1:15).

The looming eschatological climax now calls for a distinction between "the last days" (Heb 1:2) and "the hour" (Rev 3:3), "the last trumpet" and "moment" (1 Cor 15:52). The kingdom of God is proclaimed in prophecy, intrudes its signs and wonders, is historically present in the sinless and suffering servant's coming, is hastened toward its universal climax by his resurrection in anticipation of an eschatological judgment of mankind and universal victory of righteousness, and is extended by the new regenerate society's containment of injustice and unrighteousness.

The King at his coming in power and glory will enter Jerusalem while Zion is still estranged from him. He bears the names "Faithful and True" (Rev 19:11), "the Word of God" (v. 13), and "King of kings and Lord of lords" (v. 16). He shall come with a retinue of heavenly beings, an entourage of angels, which he refused to summon when he was impaled on the cross but who as God's servants remain at Christ's disposal in this final vindication of the godly and punishment of the wicked.

To this eschatological climax we are directed not only by the OT prophets but by Jesus of Nazareth as well. The past NT fulfillment does not exhaust either the predictions of the prophets or the promises of Jesus on earth or the apostolic teaching. In the present age the Church does not herself externalize the kingdom. Even at her best she only approximates

it, and at her worst she can even do violence to it. Jesus Christ himself, and the apostles in agreement, and the OT writers in anticipation, speak in principle and in fact of Christ's second coming and of the kingdom's coming. Even after his resurrection and before his ascension and exaltation Jesus spoke of the public manifestation of God's kingdom, whose time lay still in the future and whose precise date God the Father alone knows (Acts 1:7).

The invading kingdom of God meanwhile remains in each generation alien to all human kingdoms, a reality antithetical to the world-spirit and to world-orders. The kingdom as it will finally prevail is merely approximated by the new redeemed society, the obedient regenerate humanity that truly comprises the Church.

Critical scholars who contend that Jesus held only a personal or internal view of the kingdom, so that the theme merely reflects only one's subjective awareness of one's real identity, are closer to ancient stoic notions or to modern existential emphases than to any balanced representation of NT data. John's gospel, to be sure, depicts Jesus' view of the kingdom in terms of an inner new character (John 3:3, 5). Yet before Pilate Jesus leaves no doubt that the kingdom has external importance ("My kingdom is not of this world. . . . My kingdom is from another place" [John 18:36; cf. Acts 1:7]). The absence both in the OT and in the fourth gospel of the express phrase "the kingdom of God" does not annul the kingdom's external reality and presence. In John's gospel as elsewhere it is in Jesus that the kingdom impinges on and enters history, and through him participation in it is made available to humanity.

Yet the new society, as Jesus admonished, continues to pray for the coming of the kingdom in its complete and consummate manifestation, for a kingdom coming on earth as well as existing in heaven, a kingdom temporal and historical. The kingdom already manifest in Jesus, and resembled by the new society whose risen and enthroned Head bestows upon it moral powers distinctive of the age to come, moves toward a glorious manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth that dwarfs all world empires. The divine dynamic that nurtures the regenerate Church assures this mustard seed's survival and growth, since its very life-source is transcendent and supernatural. The new society, to be sure, must concede that its own condition remains perfectible. It is not yet wholly ideal and is vulnerable to disobedience and defection and even apostasy amid which only the very elect are undeceived. We can speak therefore only of the kingdom's present limited, provisional, and interim actualization in history.

Yet the vision of Christ the King presupposes also Christ's final deliverance of the kingdom to the Father (1 Cor 15:24) even more than merely its present provisional actualization. It anticipates an expanded exteriorization of the kingdom in which each generation of believers participates. Even John's gospel, with its focus on the believer's present life in the kingdom through Christ, leaves no doubt that knowledge of the kingdom in its fulness lies in the future (cf. John 5:25, 28; 11:25; 14:3; 17:24). The presently invisible Head is yet to be openly manifested: "Every eye shall see

him," as John declares (Rev 1:7). The kingdom of God as God's lordship and rule, established in the world by and in Jesus Christ, will be definitively disclosed at the end of history in a final and complete worldwide form. In the Christian view Christ will conquer every alien power and authority and will then deliver up the kingdom to the Father (1 Cor 15:24).

Meanwhile the regenerate Church, though she presently exists by the supernatural power of the Lord who through the Spirit gives new birth and life and who rules the community of faith through the Scriptures, stands in dual contrast to the world in which she dwells. For one thing she lives by law or by commandment derived from God, not from the nation-state, or from society in general, or from "nature" and so-called natural law, or even from her own inner consciousness as a new society. For God has pledged to emblazon his transcendent law on the heart of penitent humanity. For another thing the new society is divinely obliged to witness to the world and to teach the nations all that Christ has commanded. The new society is to publish worldwide the criteria by which Christ at his return in power and glory will judge the human race and all the nations. In her own lifestyle, moreover, the believing Church is to exemplify what spiritual and moral obedience really requires and is to exhort the world to conform its legal structures and social enterprises, as well as its interpersonal life, to God's revealed will.

That is quite another matter, however, from an ecclesiastical imposition upon the world in general of particulars by which God directs the new society to live. All the more inexcusable is such prescription when the new society itself spurns God's specified moral precepts. There is no justification for politicizing the Church with the special mission of abetting a God-renouncing world's misconception that it can find assured survival and durability simply by upgrading its commitment to a few religious values in the public arena or by Christianizing certain legislation, or even by deferring to so-called natural law as a norm that supposedly guarantees the common good of society at large. The task of the Church simply is not that of salvaging a world that insists on dying in its sins.

Yet the new society nonetheless holds citizenship in two realms and has express political duties on earth, duties that it should of course pursue more vigorously than does unregenerate humanity among which the new society continually moves, even if its own life and being are essentially supernatural. Not fulfilling public duty carries the high cost of almost inevitably being ruled over by authorities whose convictions are more alien than necessary to the outlook of the new society.

Divine revelation, to be sure, does not commend any one special form of government. Given humanity's fallen nature, all earthly governments will function in a flawed way. Christians should nonetheless be politically engaged to the limit of their ability and competence. Constitutional democracy offers opportunity for political self-determination, something that totalitarian tyranny cancels. It proffers to Christians no less than to others possibilities of political participation and public leadership. Yet if the price of such freedom is a pledge of uncritical loyalty to political democracy and

its governing assumptions, that price is too high. Not even political democracy is to be viewed as the political extension of the kingdom of God. Without the moral conviction, cognitive cohesion and spiritual dynamic that Christian participation offers, political democracy tends in fact to decline toward chaos. Even in a democratic society the definition of justice is not self-evident except on a premise that the morally rebellious world does not concede: that the Creator has stamped upon human beings creational imperatives that, even if now mutinously sullied, are authoritatively restated in Holy Scripture. To survive in the long run, even a democratic society must question its autonomous assumptions and respect those of the new society.

Hence the new society must not allow democratic political participation to cancel the new society's duty to transcend her own walls and to proclaim in public the claim of divine revelation upon both the Church and the world. It must reflect its confidence that the kingdom of God has in Christ already gained a secure beachhead in human history, and that Christ now rules the new society as its risen Head, and that all history is moving toward a transcendent realignment of priorities. The new society's prospect of wholeness and haleness this side of heaven exists only through the coming expansion of Christ's lordship, when justice and peace will prevail universally.

The regenerate Church's political engagement is not a matter of establishing the kingdom of God. That transcendent kingdom exists already. To be sure it is not yet fully entrenched on earth, although Jesus of Nazareth embodied it. But the regenerate Church only approximates it. The Church's participation in the transcendent virtues is not yet a matter of God's law fully etched on human hearts. Sporadic victories over injustice in the historical order, welcome and commendable as they are, are less continuous with transcendent justice in the approximations of divine justice that revisable statute law encapsulates than in what it disavows and repudiates. Only when Christ comes in power and glory will present statute law, civil and criminal, contract and property law be identical with the law of God.

Yet the believing Church's engagement in the surrounding culture is not merely optional. God's people must expose the world's pretentious assumptions, must indicate whence these flawed premises come and whither they lead, must counter them with the sovereign Lord's revealed truth and will, must expound the factuality of the kingdom in its Edenic forfeiture, in its prophetic promise, in its Christological manifestation, in its apostolic proclamation, and in its ongoing conflict with alien powers that the risen Lord perpetuates through the regenerate society that he directs as commander-in-chief.

Yet the kingdom's historical manifestation is not reducible only to sporadic irruptions that signal God's universal presence and activity either in judgment or in grace. A large segment of the Christian Church associates Christ's return in power and glory with an earthly millennial manifestation of his kingship. Support for this view is not based solely on Revelation

20, although that passage is its *locus classicus*. The book of Revelation, as G. R. Beasley-Murray comments, does appear to teach "that the Kingdom initiated by Christ's redemptive work will find its culmination in history, in its establishment in power on the earth at his parousia (19:11–20:6)."² But the view appeals also to the fact that the OT prophets frequently conjoin their anticipation of Christ's return with the universal triumph of peace and justice on earth. It also finds support in the philosophical premise that mankind's all-pervasive historical fall requires for its corrective an historical redemption that reaches "far as the curse is found." This premise is invoked not only by premillennialists but by postmillennialists also, who share an awareness that the hymnody of the Church extensively reflects confidence in the earthly triumph of the kingdom.

The amillennial position, by contrast, channels all OT prophecies into the ministry of the crucified and risen and exalted Jesus. Its strength lies not alone in its vigorous Christology but also in its avoidance of speculative date-setting and of speculative interpretations of the oscillations of history that readily beset the effort to relate contemporary events vitally to the kingdom. Whether it escapes these temptations at too high a price—that of forfeiting historical facets of the kingdom—is the crucial issue.

All branches of Christendom find the ultimate consummation of the kingdom of God in a new heavens and a new earth (Revelation 21) in which justice is fully at home and where righteousness has an undisputed dwelling place. The vision of the heavenly city of God (Rev 21:9–22:5) that Christ first unveils at his second advent "comes down" from above in express contrast to the city of the antichrist (17:1–18). This transcendent kingdom is obscured by liberation theology and, no less, by feminist theology and other social programs that seek to achieve an eschatological kingdom by human readjustment of the world-powers. What justice and peace mean to the speculative ideologies is not only more obscure than what the God of covenant inscribes on human hearts but also readily dilutes and distorts its content. The coming kingdom is not crafted in Russia or China, in Iraq or Iran, in Germany or America; it is the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Heaven, the kingdom that Messiah brings down. It is not a program for human rescue shaped by humanity's religious consciousness. It is, rather, one inaugurated and consummated by a King who has nailprints in his hands and who rules his subjects from a higher world.

² G. R. Beasley-Murray, "Kingdom of God," *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. W. E. Mills; Macon: Mercer University, 1990) 488.