

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *European Journal of Theology* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_european-journal-theology\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_european-journal-theology_01.php)

- **The Kingdom of God in the Bible, in History and Today**
- ***Le Royaume de Dieu dans la Bible, dans l'histoire, et aujourd'hui***
- ***Reich Gottes in Bibel, Geschichte und Gegenwart***

**Klaas Runia**, Professor of Practical Theology, Kampen University, Netherlands

#### SUMMARY

The article consists of three parts.

I. In the first part a survey is given of *the main different views* which have been held throughout the history of the Christian church. Since Augustine there was an increasing tendency to identify the kingdom with the visible church. In the Middle Ages this led to the infamous bull *Unam Sanctam* of Boniface VIII, subjecting the temporal power to the spiritual. The Reformers broke with these ideas, but each went his own way. Luther strongly advocated the idea of two kingdoms or two regiments, namely, the kingdom of God's left hand and that of his right hand. Calvin distinguished between Christ's kingdom and that of Satan. By the preaching of the Gospel the kingdom of Christ has to penetrate into every segment of daily life. In the 19th century a new interest arose in the concept of the kingdom of God, largely due to the development of the methods of historical-critical research. Most liberal theologians at first concentrated on the religious-ethical teaching of Jesus, as applying to the individual believer, and regarded this as the main feature of the kingdom. Afterwards in some sections of liberalism, especially in North America, all attention was focussed on the social aspect of the kingdom (e.g., Rauschenbusch). Wrede and Schweitzer rediscovered the eschatological framework of Jesus' teaching. In our own century three other views arose: the existentialist view (e.g., Bultmann), the realized eschatology view (e.g., Dodd) and the salvation history view (e.g., Cullmann and Ridderbos). Alongside these various developments there were and are also the millenarian views, with their various conceptions.

II. Next, a short summary is given of the *biblical data*. It is quite evident that the concept of the kingdom of God is a central theme in Jesus' preaching and teaching. Although the term itself is not used in the Old Testament, the basic idea is definitely present there, in particular in the prophets. God is at work in history. One day he will

send someone who is his representative in a very special way. All these OT lines converge in Jesus and his preaching and life. He himself distinguished two 'ages': this present age and the age to come. However, they are not simply subsequent. Rather, the NT teaching is like an ellipse with two *foci*. On the one hand, the age to come is fully eschatological. On the other hand, in the coming of Jesus it has already arrived. Most of the schools of thought mentioned in the first part put all the emphasis on one of these two *foci*. Only the salvation history school seems to take both aspects fully seriously. As a matter of fact, this dual emphasis is found throughout all the books of the NT. Nowhere, however, are kingdom and church identified. The church is the messianic community, belonging to the Messiah, both in his having come and in his coming again.

III. This NT teaching of the kingdom of God has important *consequences for today*. The perspective of the kingdom is fully theo-centric: it comprises the whole of creation and the whole of history. Christ is already the very centre of history today, but his reign is still hidden, *sub cruce tecta*. We are already living in the kingdom of Christ. Satan has been defeated. We are living now between D-day and V-day (Cullmann). But the dragon is still alive and persecutes the woman (the church) (Rev. 12). Sometimes we may see a few signs of our Lord's hidden reign. I think of what happened in Eastern Europe a few years ago. Those who believe in this King may serve him in this world. They should attempt great things for their King (Abraham Kuyper: *Pro Rege*). Just like our King we should be open to people around us and show them his grace and mercy and lovingkindness. But we should also try to change the structures of this world so that they no longer enslave people but set them free. Nevertheless, the kingdom itself is never of our making. It remains God's gift and will come in all its fullness, when he, our King, returns at the end of history.

## RÉSUMÉ

L'article comprend trois parties.

I. La première passe en revue les *diverses conceptions* défendues durant l'histoire de l'Eglise chrétienne. A partir de saint Augustin, on note la tendance croissante à identifier le royaume à l'Eglise visible. Au Moyen Age, elle a conduit à la trop fameuse bulle de Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctam*, qui assujettissait le pouvoir temporel au spirituel. Les Réformateurs rompirent avec ces idées, mais chacun alla son propre chemin. Luther était partisan de l'idée de deux royaumes ou «régimes»: le royaume de la main gauche de Dieu et celui de sa main droite. Calvin soulignait la distinction entre le royaume du Christ et celui de Satan. Par la prédication de l'Evangile, le royaume du Christ devait pénétrer tous les domaines de la vie quotidienne. Au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, un nouvel intérêt se manifesta pour le concept du royaume de Dieu, fruit, en bonne partie, du développement des recherches historico-critiques. La plupart des théologiens libéraux se concentrèrent d'abord sur le contenu éthico-religieux de l'enseignement de Jésus, selon qu'il s'applique aux croyants en tant qu'individus, et ils y voyaient le trait principal du royaume. Puis, dans certaines branches du libéralisme, en particulier en Amérique du Nord, toute l'attention se porta sur l'aspect social du royaume (p. ex., Rauschenbusch). Wreche et Schweitzer redécouvrirent la trame eschatologique de l'enseignement de Jésus. Au 20<sup>e</sup> siècle, trois autres points de vue virent le jour: existentialiste (p. ex., Bultmann); de l'eschatologie réalisée (p. ex., Dodd); et de l'histoire du salut (p. ex., Cullmann et Ridderbos). En outre, les conceptions millénaristes, dans leur diversité, se développaient parallèlement.

II. Suit un court résumé des *données bibliques*. Il est évident que le thème du royaume de Dieu se trouve au centre de l'enseignement et de la prédication de Jésus. Quoique le terme même ne soit pas employé dans l'A.T., l'idée essentielle y est présente, en particulier chez les prophètes. Dieu est à l'oeuvre dans l'histoire. Un jour, Dieu enverra quelqu'un qui le représentera d'une manière toute spéciale. Toutes ces

lignes de l'A.T. convergent en Jésus, en sa vie et son enseignement. Lui-même distingue deux âges ou «siècles»: l'âge (siècle) présent et l'âge (siècle) à venir. Pourtant, il n'y a pas entre eux simple succession. L'enseignement du N.T. est plutôt une ellipse, avec deux foyers. D'une part l'âge à venir est totalement eschatologique. D'autre part, il est déjà arrivé avec la venue de Jésus. La plupart des écoles de pensée mentionnées dans la première partie mettent l'accent sur l'un des deux foyers. Seule l'école dite de l'histoire du salut semble prendre en compte entièrement les deux aspects. En effet, l'accent porte sur les deux aspects à travers tous les livres du N.T. Nulle part, cependant, le royaume et l'Eglise ne sont identifiés. L'Eglise est la communauté messianique, elle appartient au Messie, comme à Celui qui est venu et qui revient.

III. Cet enseignement du N.T. sur le royaume a d'importantes *conséquences pour aujourd'hui*. La perspective du royaume est toute théocentrique: elle comprend tout ce qui relève de la création et de l'histoire. Le Christ est dès aujourd'hui le centre même de l'histoire, mais son règne est encore caché, sa royauté *sub cruce tecta*. Nous vivons déjà dans le royaume du Christ. Satan a été vaincu. Nous vivons entre le jour J et le jour V (Cullmann). Mais le dragon est encore vivant et persécute la femme (l'Eglise, Ap 12). Parfois, nous pouvons apercevoir quelques signes du règne caché de notre Seigneur. Je pense à ce qui est arrivé en Europe de l'Est il y a quelques années. Ceux qui croient au Roi peuvent le servir sur cette terre. Ils devraient entreprendre de grandes choses pour leur Roi (Abraham Kuyper: *Pro Rege*). Comme notre Roi, nous devrions être attentifs aux gens qui nous entourent et leur montrer sa grâce, sa miséricorde et sa compassion. Mais nous devrions aussi essayer de changer les structures de ce monde, pour qu'au lieu de contribuer à l'esclavage des humains, elles assurent leur liberté. Le royaume lui-même, néanmoins, ne sera pas de notre fait. Il reste le don de Dieu, et se réalisera dans sa plénitude quand lui, notre Roi, reviendra à la fin de l'histoire.

---

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Artikel besteht aus drei Teilen:

I. Im ersten Teil wird ein Überblick über die verschiedenen Sichtweisen gegeben, die im Laufe der Geschichte der christlichen Kirche zum Thema vorgetragen wurden. Seit Augustinus besteht eine wachsende Tendenz, das Reich Gottes mit der sichtbaren Kirche gleichzusetzen. Im Mittelalter führte

dies zur berühmten Bulle *Unam Sanctam* durch Bonifatius VIII., die die zeitliche Gewalt der geistlichen unterordnete. Die Reformatoren brachen mit diesen Vorstellungen, wobei jedoch jeder eigene Wege beschritt. Luther vertrat mit Nachdruck die Lehre von den zwei Reichen oder Regimenten, nämlich eines Reiches zu Gottes rechter und eines zur Gottes linker Hand. Calvin unterschied zwischen dem Reich

Christi und dem des Satans. Durch die Predigt des Evangeliums sollte das Reich Christi in jeden Bereich des täglichen Lebens eindringen. Im 19. Jh. erwachte das Interesse am Reich Gottes erneut, nicht zuletzt als Folge der Methoden historisch-kritischer Forschung. Fast alle liberalen Theologen konzentrierten sich zunächst auf die religiös-ethische Lehre Jesu, wie sie dem einzelnen Gläubigen begegnet, und betrachteten diese Seite als das eigentliche Charakteristikum des Reiches. Später, vor allem in Nordamerika, konzentrierten einige Richtungen liberaler Theologie ihre Aufmerksamkeit auf den sozialen Aspekt des Reiches (z.B. Rauschenbusch). Wrede und Schweizer entdeckten den eschatologischen Rahmen der Lehre Jesu. In unserem Jahrhundert begegnen drei andere Sichtweisen: die existenzialistische Sicht Bultmanns, die Real-eschatologie Dodds und die heilsgeschichtliche Sichtweise Cullmanns und Ridderbos'. Einhergehend mit diesen verschiedenen Entwicklungen gab und gibt es in ihren verschiedenen Ausformungen auch chiliastische Interpretationen.

II. Im zweiten Teil wird eine kurze Zusammenfassung der biblischen Daten gegeben. Es ist evident, daß der Gedanke des Reiches Gottes in der Verkündigung Jesu ein zentrales Thema ist. Obwohl der Begriff im AT nicht vorkommt, finden sich dort definitiv, insbesondere bei den Propheten, dazu grundlegende Gedanken: Gott wirkt in der Geschichte. Eines Tages wird er einen senden, der auf ganz besondere Weise sein Repräsentant sein wird. Alle diese altt. Linien laufen auf Jesus, seine Predigt und sein Leben zu. Er selbst unterschied zwei 'Zeiten': die gegenwärtige und die zukünftige. Dennoch folgen sie nicht einfach aufeinander. Die ntl. Lehre ist vielmehr wie eine Ellipse mit zwei Brennpunkten. Einerseits ist die kommende Zeit ganz eschatologisch,

andererseits ist sie mit dem Kommen Jesu bereits angebrochen. Fast alle im ersten Teil erwähnten Schulen legen allen Nachdruck auf einen der beiden Brennpunkte. Lediglich die heilsgeschichtliche Schule nahm beide Aspekte ernst. Tatsächlich begegnet diese doppelte Sicht in allen Schriften des NT. Doch werden Reich Gottes und Kirche an keiner Stelle einander gleichgesetzt. Die Kirche ist messianische Gemeinschaft, gehört zum Messias und dies in seinem Gekommensein und in seiner Wiederkunft.

III. Die ntl. Lehre vom Reich Gottes hat wichtige Konsequenzen für das Heute. Die Sicht des Reiches ist gänzlich theozentrisch: es umfaßt die gesamte Schöpfung sowie die gesamte Geschichte. Christus ist auch heute die Mitte der Geschichte, wenngleich sein Reich verborgen bleibt: *sub cruce tecta*. Wir leben bereits im Reich Christi, denn der Satan wurde besiegt. Wir leben zwischen dem Tag der Ankunft und dem Tag der Wiederkunft (Cullmann). Aber der Drache lebt noch und verfolgt die Frau (die Kirche) (Apk 12). Manchmal können wir einige wenige Zeichen des verborgenen Reiches unseres Herrn sehen. Ich denke dabei an die Ereignisse in Osteuropa. Die, die an diesen König glauben, können ihm in dieser Welt dienen. Sie sollten Großes für ihren König tun (Abraham Kyper: *Pro Rege*). Wie unser König selbst, sollten wir für die Menschen um uns herum offen sein und ihnen seine Gnade und Barmherzigkeit zeigen. Aber wir sollten auch versuchen, die Strukturen dieser Welt zu verändern, so daß sie nicht länger Menschen in Knechtschaft halten, sondern befreien. Dennoch, das Reich selbst ist niemals etwas, das wir aus uns hervorbrächten. Es bleibt Gottes Geschenk und wird in seiner Fülle kommen, wenn er, unser König, am Ende der Geschichte wiederkehrt.

## I. DIFFERENT VIEWS

**I**n the course of the centuries there has been quite a number of different interpretations of the New Testament concept of the 'kingdom of God'. Naturally, it is impossible to discuss them all and to discuss them at great length. It must suffice to summarize some of the main ideas.

1. When after the conversion of Constantine the Great the church began to expand rapidly, we soon see the tendency arise to identify the kingdom with the visible church. The beginnings of it can already be found in *Augustine's* great work

*De Civitate Dei* ('The City of God'). Here he contrasts the earthly city, that is, the secular world, which comprises the profane and the reprobate but also the demons, with the *civitas Dei*, the 'City of God', which comprises the angels and the saints of all ages. Although in Augustine's view this 'City of God' is much wider than the empirical church, he nevertheless sees a very close relationship between the two and in this way his view paved the way for later developments in the *Middle Ages*. Fairly soon the church began to identify itself increasingly with the kingdom and consequently claimed authority in both spiritual

and worldly affairs. The most striking example of this claim is found in the famous bull *Unam Sanctam* issued by Pope Boniface VIII. The pope declared that both the 'spiritual sword' and the 'temporal sword' were alike committed to the church. Although the 'temporal sword' was delegated to the secular authorities, the temporal power remained subject to the spiritual power, because the latter was the higher and the greater of the two.

2. All *Reformers* broke with these ideas and rejected the identification of church and kingdom. Yet there are some important differences between them concerning their view of the kingdom. *Luther* strongly advocated the idea of two 'kingdoms' or 'regiments'. The one kingdom is that which stands under the authority of the secular government. It may be called God's kingdom and we have to obey it, but it is only 'the kingdom of God's left hand'. His 'rightful kingdom where He Himself rules and where He appoints neither father nor mother, emperor nor king, henchman nor policeman, but where He is Himself the Lord is this: where the Gospel is being preached to the poor'. This 'rightful kingdom' is the church. It cannot be denied that here, too, we find some kind of identification of church and kingdom. But it is quite different from the medieval identification, because *Luther* stresses that this kingdom is of a purely spiritual nature only. Says *Luther*: "The kingdom of Christ has nothing to do with external matters, it leaves such things unchanged as they are and moves within its [own] orders". In other words, only the spiritual aspect of the church, which is wholly defined by the preaching of the gospel, may be seen as the kingdom of the right hand.

3. *Calvin* had quite a different approach. He, too, believed that there are two kingdoms in this world, but they are of a totally opposite nature. The one is the kingdom of Christ, who reigns from on high; the other is the kingdom of Satan, who constantly opposes Christ and his kingdom (cf. *Instit.* I, xiv, 18). The church is so closely related to Christ's kingdom that at times *Calvin* explicitly calls it the 'kingdom of Christ'

(IV, 11,4). Yet the identification is never complete. The kingdom of Christ (which is the present form of the kingdom of God) is much wider than the church. From the Word that is being preached in the church it extends to and penetrates into family life and into all aspects of society at large. Wherever life is sanctified by the gospel and by the power of the Holy Spirit, there we see traces of the kingdom. *Ronald S. Wallace* says that 'the fulfilment of the renewal and restoration of order through the Cross is something that has to be manifested in the life of society as the influence of the Cross is experienced from day to day' (*Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 1959, 110). *Abraham Kuyper* was clearly in line with this when he maintained that 'there is not a square inch of life of which Christ does not say: "It is mine"'. It does not surprise us either that he wrote a three-volume work on the task of the Christian in the world under the title *Pro Rege* (For the King).

4. In particular in the 19th century a new interest arose in the concept of the 'kingdom of God'. This was mainly due to the development of New Testament historical-critical research in this century. Biblical texts were subjected to all kinds of historical-criticism and were analysed with the razor-sharp scalpel of literary and historical methods. Unfortunately the usual result was that the message of the text was adapted to the view(s) of the researcher himself. Yet it cannot be denied that the insight into the biblical teaching of the kingdom was enhanced. With regard to the doctrine of the kingdom of God we can distinguish the following views which all have their own special niche in 19th or 20th century theology.

(a) The *liberal* view. Liberal theology generally rejected the eschatological sayings in the New Testament as time-conditioned. The real message is the religious-ethical teaching of Jesus and his disciples. According to *Adolf Harnack*, in his famous lectures on *What is Christianity?* (1900), the essence of Christianity lies in the fatherhood of God, the infinite worth of the individual soul, the higher righteousness

and the commandment of love. These aspects were also the main features of the kingdom that Jesus preached.

(b) The *social* view. In certain sections of liberalism, especially of North American liberalism, attention was focussed on the social aspect of the kingdom. To mention just one example, Walter Rauschenbusch believed that in the past the chief purpose of the church had been the salvation of individuals but that in the troubled circumstances of industrial society the church should seek for a message for society as a whole. Searching the Scriptures he did find such a message. He discovered it not only in the denunciations of the OT prophets against social injustice, but in particular in Jesus' preaching of the kingdom, which he interpreted as a social ideal. It is our task, through the power of Christ, to build this kingdom on earth and to promote its righteousness. Conversion, in this concept, is the turning from a self-centred life to a life that centres in society, Christ himself being the great example and model.

(c) The *eschatological* view. By the end of the 19th century some New Testament scholars, such as W. Wrede and A. Schweitzer, rediscovered the eschatological framework of Jesus' preaching, including his message of the kingdom. Jesus was not a kind pietistic or religious or social teacher, but a Jewish apocalyptic who expected the imminent end of history and the inauguration of the age to come. At that very same moment the kingdom of God will burst forth. Albert Schweitzer worked this out in the last part of his famous book *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1906), but he ends the book with the statement that, unfortunately, Jesus was mistaken. The last words about this apocalyptic Jesus are: 'At midday of the same day – it was the 14th Nisan, on the evening of which the Paschal lamb was eaten – Jesus cried aloud and expired' (395). The kingdom did not come!

(d) The *existentialist* view. In our century Rudolf Bultmann, who also adopted the eschatological interpretation of the kingdom, added his own novel interpretation, suggesting that this eschatological framework is 'mythological' in nature. In itself

this was not a new idea, for the liberals had said the same. But Bultmann's conclusion was quite different. He did not, as the liberals had done, excise all these mythological elements, but suggested that we should de-mythologize them and re-interpret them as expressions of an important existentialist truth: the kingdom of God is *at any time near to all who hear the gospel*. The kingdom is not something of the future, but we live in the eschatological present of the kingdom: in the proclamation of the gospel all hearers are challenged to decide *now*, at this very moment, for Jesus and his kingdom and therefore for a meaningful existence that is open to God.

(e) The view of *realized eschatology*. The British scholar C.H. Dodd also recognized the eschatological nature of the kingdom, but interpreted it differently again. He put all emphasis on the fact that in the coming of Jesus the eschatological promise has already been 'realized'. The eschatological language of the Bible, which speaks of things that are to happen in the future, at the end of the world, must now be interpreted in *historical* terms: in Jesus the eternal has already irrupted into the temporal, the wholly other into the historical present. The kingdom is already in our midst.

(f) The *salvation history* view. The majority of scholars of our own century, however, believe that we must distinguish between the present and the eschatological aspects of the kingdom. Taking as their starting point the biblical teaching that in his dealings with mankind God has entered into a 'history of salvation' (*Heilsgeschichte*), they agree with Dodd that in Jesus the kingdom has already come. Yet they also maintain that we are still waiting for an eschatological consummation at the end of history. This consummation will not be the result of the gradual development of the kingdom in history, in the sense that one day we will suddenly discover that the kingdom in all its fullness is already with us, but it will be the sudden and unexpected irruption of the returning Christ into the history of this world, inaugurating God's visible and definitive reign, which will last into all

eternity. In this view the kingdom is both present and future and the final coming means both continuity and discontinuity.

(g) Finally, there is still the *millenarian* view. In the first half of the 19th century the idea of a literal reign of Christ on earth, for a literal period of a thousand years ('millennium'), became popular again. To a large extent this was due to the influence of J.N. Darby, one of the founding fathers of the Brethren movement. He advocated a premillenarian view. Most present-day premillenarians expect the personal advent of Christ and the bodily resurrection of the saints to precede the millennium (hence the use of prefix 'pre-'). Next, for a period of a thousand years, Jesus will reign visibly in Jerusalem, the Jews will be converted and the heathen nations will come to Jerusalem to worship there. After these thousand years Satan will be released for a little season, the final battle of Armageddon will be waged and then the new heaven and the new earth will become a reality. This view is widely held among American evangelicals. People of a Reformed persuasion usually believe that the millennium has to be seen as a symbol, indicating the whole period from the ascension to the parousia of Christ, during which period he already reigns from the throne. At his return his total victory over evil will become manifest and he himself will surrender his kingdom to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24).

## II. BIBLICAL DATA

Again we must begin by saying that it is impossible to deal with all biblical data at great length. Especially in our century a whole library of books has been published on the topic of the kingdom in the New Testament. We must, therefore, restrict ourselves to a mere outline.

1. It is quite evident that the concept of the 'kingdom of God' is a *central theme* in Jesus' preaching and teaching. Time and again we encounter it in the Synoptic Gospels. Mark uses it fourteen times and in Luke it occurs thirty-two times. Matthew uses it only four times, but in the other parallel places he has the term 'kingdom of heaven', which is equivalent to

'kingdom of God'. In the Gospel of John the occurrence is much less frequent, due to the fact that John, like the writers of the New Testament Epistles, focusses all attention on the person of Jesus himself.

According to Matthew, John the Baptist started his preaching with the announcement: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (3:2). He sees the coming of the kingdom as a purely apocalyptic and eschatological event that is near at hand. Therefore he calls his hearers to repentance, for the coming of the kingdom means that the last judgment is nearby. He speaks of the greater One, who is coming after him and who is much mightier. 'His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire' (3:12).

2. Does this mean that the term 'kingdom of heaven' was invented by John the Baptist? I do not believe this. I rather think that Matthew used the term to summarize John's preaching. The other Synoptic Gospels do not put the phrase into John's mouth. It is also interesting to note that in literature antedating the Gospels the expression 'kingdom of God' hardly ever occurs. The Old Testament does not use it at all. In intertestamental literature it is found only a few times. Yet the basic idea is definitely present in the Old Testament, in particular in the *Prophets*. There are two important lines of thought present in them. In the first place there is the idea that *God is at work in history*. To put it in the words of the title of a book by G.E. Wright: God is the 'God who acts', who acts in history. The prophets also clearly indicate that God's actions are never arbitrary. He himself has set the direction and goal for history. This goal is his kingly rule. At the end of history God will establish his rule in perfect and manifest glory. This final consummation, however, will not be a matter of an intra-historical development. Rather, it will be the result of a divine 'visitation', which is of a supra-historical nature. In other words, God is not only the 'God who acts', but also the 'God who comes'. Suddenly he shall break into history in a totally new way and

shall establish his definitive kingly rule. His coming will mean a 'rupture' of history. But this is not all that is to be said here. There is not only discontinuity but also continuity. The kingship of God shall be a kingship on this earth. The prophets use various images, which cannot always be harmonized and fused into one consistent picture, but one thing is clear: they all point to a perfecting of the present order of things. At the same time this perfecting will mean a radical transformation.

But there is still a second line of thought. With a view to the establishment of God's kingship and the radical transformation of the present order, there will come *some one who is sent by God*. This unknown person of the future is described by various terms. Sometimes he is called the Son of David indicating that he will be a Davidic king. In other places he is described as the Messiah, which means the Anointed One and therefore is also an indication that he will be an earthly king from the lineage of David. In these terms the emphasis is on continuity. But there is also the aspect of discontinuity, when he is called the Son of man (Dan. 7:13, 14), a pre-existent, supernatural, heavenly figure, who comes from heaven to earth to hold judgment and to establish God's kingly rule. But even this is not all. There is also the mysterious figure of the Servant of the Lord, who shall suffer and give his life for his people. In the Old Testament itself these various images are not yet interconnected. They stand side by side.

3. In the New Testament we see how all these lines and images *converge in Jesus and his preaching and life*. Like John the Baptist, Jesus begins his preaching with the words: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matt. 4:17). Mark formulates it in a slightly different way: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel' (1:15).

Yet there is a difference between the preaching of John the Baptist and that of Jesus. One of the most striking differences is that Jesus distinguishes between *two ages*: this present age and the age to come. 'This [present] age is the time of sinful-

ness, evil and rebellion against God; the age to come will see the perfect establishment of God's rule in the world and the purging of all sin, evil and rebellion' (G.E. Ladd, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, 26). This present age is under the dominion of Satan, but Jesus has come to fight the great battle against Satan. He defeats Satan, but the final victory will happen only in the age to come, when the consummation of history takes place. This consummation itself will be inaugurated by the coming of the Son of man. This is the element of truth in the eschatological school.

Unfortunately this school one-sidedly concentrated everything on the consummation in the end time. The New Testament, however, does not do this. Its teaching is more like an ellipse with two *foci*. On the one hand, the age to come is *really eschatological*. In its fullness it will become manifest in the great future, the end of all time. We observe this throughout all Jesus' preaching. On the other hand, we observe that in the coming of Jesus himself the kingdom *has already arrived*, right in the midst of this present age. In his preaching and miracles Jesus is already defeating Satan. When the Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by Be-elzebul, the prince of demons, he replies that every kingdom that is divided against itself is laid waste and adds: 'But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Matt. 12:28). When the seventy disciples return from their preaching mission and joyfully announce that even the demons were subject to them in Jesus' name, he replies: 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven' (Luke 10:18). These words should not be taken literally. They simply mean that Satan has already been defeated. Later on, he says to the Pharisees who ask him when the kingdom of God is coming, 'The kingdom of God is in the midst of you' (Luke 17:21). Accordingly Jesus' disciples are already enjoying the fruits of the kingdom. This, no doubt, is the moment of truth in Dodd's view of 'realized eschatology'. It is also the moment of truth in Bultmann's existentialist view and even in



the liberal view, which interprets the kingdom primarily in religious and ethical terms.

4. Nevertheless, all these views also suffer from one-sidedness. In my opinion the so-called salvation-history school is the only one that does justice to all the biblical data. Here the mutual relationship-intension, which is characteristic of the two *foci* of every ellipse, is fully maintained.

(a) It recognizes that in Jesus himself the kingdom has *already* come. The Church Father Origen summarized this aspect in the famous term '*autobasileia*' – Jesus himself is the '*basileia*', the kingdom. This also includes the idea that the kingdom having arrived in Jesus, in the midst of history, now expands throughout history. That this was Jesus' own intention appears from some of his parables. The twin parables of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great value (Matt. 13:44–46) both indicate that the kingdom has come in Jesus himself. The twin parables of the grain of mustard seed, growing into a tree, and of the leaven that leavens the whole bowl of dough, both indicate the process of the kingdom growing and expanding throughout history.

All this means that Jesus himself is the promised Messiah. But at the same time he is also the Suffering Servant and the Son of Man. In his teaching Jesus himself brings these strands of thought together. When his disciples quarrel about the question who will be the greatest in the kingdom of God Jesus says to them: 'The Son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28; cf. Luke 22:27).

(b) Yet there is also the *eschatological future*. One day Jesus shall return as the glorious Son of Man, as mentioned in Daniel 7:13, 14. This glorious return will inaugurate the great day of judgment and the subsequent manifestation of the kingdom in all its fullness and splendour.

5. This very same salvation-history concept of the kingdom, with its two *foci*, the present and the future, we also find in all the other books of the New Testament. It is true the term 'kingdom of God' is not used much in them. In the book of Acts it is

used only six times. But this does not mean that the idea is no longer present. It is present everywhere, but in a new imagery. The emphasis has shifted to Jesus himself as the very content of the kingdom. The book of Acts speaks of the risen and ascended Lord, who is at the right hand of the Father and exercises the authority of the kingdom in a new fashion. In the very first Christian sermon, which Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost, he emphatically says that God has made Jesus 'Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified' (2:36). And in the last moments of his life Stephen sees Jesus as 'the Son of man, standing at the right hand of God'; 'standing', that is, as the one who exercises the supreme authority as the representative of God himself.

The two aspects of the kingdom, both the present and the future, are clearly visible in *Paul's* preaching and teaching. The kingdom is both a present blessing (Rom. 14:17; Col. 1:13) and an eschatological inheritance (1 Cor. 6:9; 15:50; Eph. 5:5; *etc.*). On the one hand, the believers have already been transferred into the 'kingdom of [God's] beloved Son' (Col. 1:17); on the other, they are still awaiting the inheritance of the kingdom, which will be made manifest when Jesus appears in glory (2 Tim. 4:1). Very important is the passage 1 Cor. 15:24–26. Paul deals in this chapter with the resurrection from the dead and the final defeat of death. Very clearly he states that at this very moment Christ is *already* the great messianic king. But his kingship is not yet perfected. Sitting at the right hand of the Father he is in the process of breaking down every rule and every authority and power that opposes him. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. When this has happened, the end of our present history will have arrived and Christ will turn over his rule to the Father, 'that God may be everything to every one', or as the King James Version has it, 'all in all'.

Then heaven and earth will be renewed and the new heaven and the new earth will be reality. Then the words, spoken to John on Patmos, will be fulfilled: 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people,

and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away' (Rev. 21:3, 4). Then the 'age to come' has become 'this present age'!

6. Before we move on to the consequences of this biblical picture of the kingdom, we have to raise one more point. What is the relationship between the *kingdom* and the *church*? It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus gathered people around himself. From the beginning of his public appearance he called people to be his 'disciples'. Later on twelve of these men were chosen as his 'apostles'. Mark tells us that he appointed twelve 'to be with Him and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons' (3:14). 'Twelve' – the number is not only to be taken literally but it is symbolical as well. These twelve men are the nucleus of the new Israel of the Messiah. The idea of a messianic community belongs to the very gospel of the kingdom. This is the moment of truth in Augustine's view. But he went too far, for nowhere in Scripture do we find the idea of identification between community and kingdom. Herman Ridderbos puts it thus: 'The basileia is the great divine work of salvation in its fulfilment and consummation in Christ; the ekklesia is the people elected and called by God and sharing in the bliss of the basileia' (*The Coming of the Kingdom*, 1962, 354). They belong together and yet they are different. The kingdom has a much more comprehensive content. It 'represents the all-embracing perspective, it denotes the consummation of all history, brings both grace and judgment, has cosmic dimensions, fills time and eternity.' The ekklesia comprises the people 'who in this great drama have been placed on the side of God..., have been given the divine promises, have been...gathered together by the preaching of the gospel, and will inherit the redemption of the kingdom now and in the great future.'

### III. CONSEQUENCES FOR TODAY

1. It is quite obvious that the kingdom is one of the most central concepts in the

New Testament. Even though it may sound strange, the concept of the kingdom in the New Testament is even more central than that of the Messiah and of the Spirit. Admittedly, these last two concepts are also very fundamental. We owe it to Jesus that we are reconciled to God. We owe it to the Holy Spirit that we have a part in this reconciliation and are renewed, so that we are able to lead a new life. But the perspective of the kingdom is still wider. It is fully theo-centric. The very heart of the gospel is the kingdom that has been promised by God himself and that will be brought about by him. In the final analysis the Messiah and the Spirit are in the service of the kingdom. The kingdom is so broad that it comprises the whole of creation and the whole of history.

Today it is not yet visible in all its perfection. We are still living in 'the last days' of this history (cf. Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2; 2 Tim. 3:1; Jas. 5:3, 2 Pet. 3:3). The New Testament calls this whole period of 'the last days', which started with the first coming of the Messiah, 'the kingdom of the Son'. To be true, it is still the kingdom of God, but in this period it is present in a very special mode of being, namely, the mode of 'hiddenness'. This does not mean that it is not real. E. Stauffer summarizes the entire theology of the New Testament under the heading: 'The christocentric theology of history in the New Testament' (*New Testament Theology*, 1955, 49). Christ is the very centre of today's history. He reigns from on high. But it is, to borrow a term of Luther, a reign, which is *sub cruce tecta*, hidden under the cross. In a similar way Paul writes about the new life of the Christian believers: 'For you have died, and your life is *hid* with Christ in God' (Col. 3:3). The new life is present, but it is not yet manifest to the neutral observer. It can only be seen in faith. Likewise, Christ's reign is a reality: God 'has bestowed on Him the name which is above every name' (Phil. 2:9), but we do not yet see that 'at the name of Jesus every knee...bow[s], in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue confess[es] that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (2:10, 11).

2. All this signifies that today we are already living in the kingdom of Christ. Satan has been defeated. This does not mean that he no longer has any power. On the contrary, his power is still very great. The well-known New Testament scholar Oscar Cullmann once clarified the situation created by the 'already' and the 'not yet' of the kingdom by the imagery of *D-Day* and *V-Day*, terms dating from the second world war. When on June 6, 1944, the invasion in France took place and the allied forces managed to establish a foothold on the continent, this day was called D-Day, the day of the decision. At that moment the German armies were defeated in principle. But for nearly a year the battle continued. At a certain stage the German armies even went into the offensive and threatened to defeat the allied forces. This attack was afterwards known as the Battle of the Bulge. Only in June 1945 did the German armies surrender completely. This was V-Day, the day of the victory. In the book of Revelation we find another picture. In chapter 12 John sees a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. This woman is a picture of the people of God. John further sees that she brings forth a male child (the Messiah), who subsequently is caught up to God and to his throne. The woman then flees into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God. In the meantime a battle takes place in heaven and Michael defeats the dragon, who is thrown down to earth. This is clear evidence of his defeat. But on earth he continues his evil work and pursues the woman, who has to fly into the wilderness. There the dragon tries to destroy her.

When we look at the history of the Christian church the picture is quite clear. Throughout the ages the dragon has persecuted the church. Sometimes he did it by sheer brute power. Most of the time he did it in more subtle ways: by temptation and seduction. Yet he has never managed to destroy the church. This is impossible. D-Day has happened already; the decisive battle has been fought in the death and resurrection of Christ. Satan has been

defeated. Jesus reigns from the throne and is Lord of all. To be true, it is a 'hidden' rule; it cannot simply be demonstrated; it is not part of the evening news and it does not make the headlines. Only once in a while we may see a few signs of his reign – for instance, when the power of the gospel manifests itself and people turn to him as their Lord and Saviour. But sometimes we see them also in secular history. I am thinking here in particular of what we recently have witnessed in Eastern Europe. All of a sudden the power of the evil system of communism broke down. In many cases it was members of the Christian church who took the lead and initiated the crumbling down of the whole system. And the wonder of it all was that the system was not demolished by outside forces but by forces from within. The communist empire appeared to be a fake empire. Of course, people in the Western world should realize that in their countries, too, Satan is very influential. Western capitalism is no more Christian than communism. All powers of a suppressive nature are serving Satan. Only Jesus truly sets free. He himself summarized his gospel, which is the gospel of the kingdom, in his first recorded sermon, in the synagogue of Nazareth: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord' (Luke 4:18, 19). And he added: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (4:21). In him the kingdom has come as a reality. He is the King of this world.

3. We who believe in him and praise his name, may *serve him* in this world. To put it in the words of William Carey, the father of the modern missionary movement: 'We may attempt great things for Him and expect great things from Him'. This belief was also the great strength of Abraham Kuyper. He saw it as his high calling to attempt great things *pro Rege*, for the King. He tried to do this in particular by means of establishing Christian organizations in all areas of life, and he was very

successful on this score. In the Netherlands a large web of Christian organizations came into existence and they have been very influential in shaping the face of Dutch society. Naturally, this is not the only solution. In many other countries such organizations are hardly feasible or not at all possible and Christians have to work in co-operation with people of other faiths or no faith at all. But even then Christians should not be ashamed of their Lord but bring up and promote the cause of his kingdom whenever there is an opportunity. It is a kingdom of righteousness and peace, a kingdom of humanity and compassion, a kingdom in which the poor are called blessed and the hungry are satisfied.

As Christians we may put our trust in this Lord, who calls us into his service and gives us the privilege of being his co-workers, both in the church and in the world, both within the fellowship of those who believe in him and among those who do not really know him or who may never even have heard of him. As he was open to the people around him, so we should be. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin describes Jesus' attitude to people in the following words: 'We see Jesus eagerly welcome the signs of faith among men and women outside of the house of Israel;...we see him lovingly welcome those whom others cast out;...we see him on the cross with arms outstretched to embrace the whole world and...we hear his whispered words, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do".' When we see all this, 'we are seeing the most fundamental of all realities, namely a grace and mercy and loving-kindness which reaches out to every creature' (*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 1989, 175). Is there any better example to model ourselves and our life style after? And is it not a very encouraging example? The Gospels show us that by this attitude of the King himself the kingdom became a reality in the lives of people and that it changed their lives in such a way that later on a heathen grudgingly had to admit: 'See how these Christians love one another'.

4. The kingdom of Christ, however, is not only a matter of the changed lives of individual Christians. It also wants to change

the *structures* that constitute the framework of human society. This very same idea undergirded the Christian organizations Kuyper established. Their purpose was not just to keep the Christian people together in 'splendid isolation', but to combine the efforts of Christians so that they might the better be able to penetrate into the world around them. We must always remember that Jesus is not only the Head of the church (Col. 1:18) but also the King of the world (Eph. 1:22). The righteousness of his kingdom (Matt. 6:33) should take form in the structures of the state and of society at large. Christians should be witnesses of this righteousness and do their utmost to change oppressive structures into liberating structures. They should work for structures that procure freedom and humanity to all people, in particular to those who find themselves on the fringes of society and have no opportunity to change their own situation. Remembering Paul's words to the Philippians: 'Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things' (4:8), Christians should also try to permeate the surrounding culture with the beauty of the kingdom of Christ. In other words, Christians have a never-ending task in the kingdom of their Lord and Master. At the same time they should realize that the kingdom is not of their own making. It will not be completed and finalized by us Christians. Jesus himself will do this, when he returns. Then the fullness of the kingdom will become manifest and the Son will deliver his kingdom to the Father so that in all eternity God will be all in all.

This is not said to dishearten us but rather to encourage us. For now we know for sure that one day the kingdom will be a certain and everlasting reality. And in the meantime we joyfully take to heart the words of the apostle Paul, who at the close of the chapter on the resurrection and the final appearance of the kingdom writes: 'Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.'