

**Thy Kingdom Come:  
A Reformed Definition of the Kingdom of God**  
2006 WSC Alumni Lecture  
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**I. INTRODUCTION**

**II. SURVEY OF VIEWS**

A. As apprehended by premillennial Dispensationalists

1. Lewis Sperry Chafer says that amillennialists “metamorphose a literal, earthly throne and kingdom into some vague and wholly imaginary spiritual idealism.”<sup>1</sup>
2. J. Dwight Pentecost in his review of Herman Ridderbos’ book, *The Coming of the Kingdom*: “Ignoring the Old Testament anticipation of a literal kingdom for Israel ruled over by David’s son, the author is free to interpret the New Testament according to his amillennial presuppositions, which see the kingdom as a spiritual kingdom in which God rules over the hearts of men.”<sup>2</sup>
4. Charles Ryrie: “Let us suppose for sake of discussion that the dispensational interpretation of Jesus’ offer of the Davidic kingdom in the Gospels is not correct. If he was not preaching about the millennial kingdom when He said, “Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17), then He must have been talking about a spiritual kingdom in the hearts of men (for there are no other choices). This is, of course, the kind of kingdom which both the amillennialist and the covenant premillennialist say Jesus was offering in the Gospels.”<sup>3</sup>
5. Darrell Bock (note only **two** options he lists): “To define the kingdom is not easy. Is the kingdom spiritual only? Is it political only? Is it manifest only in the church or in the millennium? Is it both spiritual and earthly? Does it come in phases? How are Israel and the church connected to it? These are the questions operating below the surface in any definition of the kingdom.”<sup>4</sup>

B. By Various Reformed authors

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 5 (Dallas, 1948), 321.

<sup>2</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *BibSac* 121 (1964): 69–70; quote from p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 166.

<sup>4</sup> Darrell L. Bock, “Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment,” *Trinity Journal* (1994): 55–87, quote p. 59.

1. Louis Berkhof:
  - a. In connection with the present day tendency to regard the kingdom of God simply as a new social condition, an ethical kingdom of ends, to be established by human endeavors, such as education, legal enactments, and social reforms, it is well to bear in mind that the term “kingdom of God” is not always used in the same sense. *Fundamentally, the term denotes an abstract rather than a concrete idea, namely, the rule of God established and acknowledged in the hearts of sinners.* If this is clearly understood, the futility of all human efforts and of all mere externals is at once apparent. By no mere human endeavors can the rule of God be established in the heart of a single man, nor can any man be brought to a recognition of that rule. *In the measure in which God establishes His rule in the hearts of sinners, He creates for Himself a realm in which He rules and in which He dispenses the greatest privileges and the choicest blessings.* (emphasis added)<sup>5</sup>
  - b. *It is a kingdom that is both present and future.* It is on the one hand a present, ever developing, spiritual reality in the hearts and lives of men, and as such exercises influence in a constantly widening sphere. . . . [contra Premillenarians] On the other hand it is also a future hope, an eschatological reality; in fact, the eschatological aspect of the kingdom is the more prominent of the two . . . [cites texts]. Essentially the future kingdom will consist, like that of the present, in the rule of God established and acknowledged in the hearts of men. But at the glorious coming of Jesus Christ this establishment and acknowledgment will be perfected, the hidden forces of the kingdom will stand revealed, and the spiritual rule of Christ will find its consummation in a visible and majestic reign. It is a mistake, however, to assume that the present kingdom will develop almost imperceptibly into the kingdom of the future. The Bible clearly teaches us that the future kingdom will be ushered in by great cataclysmic changes.<sup>6</sup>
2. Herman Ridderbos: “[T]he future eschatological vision does not form a mere setting or enclosure of Jesus’ preaching. No more is it to be chiefly restricted to the so-called synoptic apocalypse (Matt. 24:4–36; Mark 13:5–37; Luke 21:8–36). But it is an essential element in his preaching of the kingdom of heaven. In this respect there can be no doubt that the eschatological interpretation of the gospel is justified insofar as it opposes the immanence-thought of the ethical and the liberal theology. It emphatically defends the

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<sup>5</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996; repr. 1938 ed.), 408.

<sup>6</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 409. Note some excellent material on the kingdom and the church and the distinction between the *regnum gratiae* and the *regnum potentiae* in pp. 409–11.

transcendent and future character of the kingdom of heaven preached by Jesus. Taken in this sense, the kingdom preached by Jesus bears the character of a consummation.”<sup>7</sup>

3. Anthony Hoekema

- a. How shall we define the kingdom of God? This is not an easy things to do, particularly not since Jesus himself never gives a definition of the kingdom. Neither do we find such a definition in the apostolic writings. . . . We shall have to proceed inductively.<sup>8</sup>
- b. The kingdom of God, therefore, is to be understood as the reign of God dynamically active in human history through Jesus Christ, the purpose of which is the redemption of his people from sin and from demonic powers, and the final establishment of the new heavens and the new earth. It means that the great drama of the history of salvation has been inaugurated, and that the new age has been ushered in. The kingdom must not be understood as merely the salvation of certain individuals or even as the reign of God in the hearts of his people; it means nothing less that the reign of God over his entire created universe.<sup>9</sup>
- c. Man’s duty is not to bring the kingdom into existence, but to enter into it by faith, and to pray that he may be enabled more and more to submit himself to the beneficent rule of God in every area of his life. The kingdom is not man’s upward climb to perfection but God’s breaking into human history to establish his reign and to advance his purposes.<sup>10</sup>

4. Kim Riddlebarger. See **Chapter 9** of *A Case for Amillennialism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

**III. LEXICAL BACKGROUND**

**IV. DEFINITION OF THE KINGDOM**

- A. Don’t start with present.
- B. The kingdom of God proper:
  1. The *συνελεύση τοῦ αἰῶνος* or in Jesus’ quaint term, the *παλιγγεννησία*.
  2. The consummation of this age and the redemptive renovation of all things.
  3. Contemporary and integral:
    - i. The second advent of Christ

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<sup>7</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), 38.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 44.

<sup>9</sup> Hoekema, *Bible and the Future*, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Hoekema, *Bible and the Future*, 45.

- ii. the resurrection of the dead
  - iii. the final judgment
  - iv. and the new heavens and new earth.
4. At this consummate event the triune God will assert his rightful kingship for endless ages with no possible rebellion ever again.<sup>11</sup>
  5. Accordingly, any aspect of the kingdom of God which we experience now through the first advent and accomplished work of Christ is an anticipation of *that* consummation kingdom and not something else.

### C. Summary: Four Key Attributes

1. Consummative or Eschatological
  - a. New heavens and new earth (Rev 21:1–7)
  - b. Not of this age, but follows. More glorious restoration of original created order and re-assertion of God’s kingship held by right as Creator but now as Redeemer.
  - c. Eternal—“unshakeable” (Heb 12:28)
  - d. Age to come or world to come.
2. Heavenly: direct, uncontested reign of the triune God with his people who will dwell in his presence in incorruptible resurrected existence.
3. Spiritual
  - a. Of the Holy Spirit—the “atmosphere” (Vos) of the age to come: John 3; 1 Cor 15
  - b. Infused with divine glory and power to be “incorruptible” (1 Cor 15)
  - c. Inhabited by resurrected saints alone who “enter”, “see”, “inherit” this kingdom (1 Cor 15:50; Beatitudes)
  - d. Perfected saints confirmed in holiness and righteousness

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<sup>11</sup> There are many passages where this is established; here is just one example: “Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.’ And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, ‘We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.’ Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.” (Rev 11:15–19)

4. Christocentric
  - a. Christ Jesus alone is the Way, the Door
  - b. As the work of the Second Adam, he restores the original divine rule over creation to greater glory
  - c. Having finished his main task,
    - i. the Lamb has ascended to the Right Hand of the Majesty on High
    - ii. to rule all things by the word of his power
    - iii. until every knee bows down before him
    - iv. and every enemy is destroyed
    - v. and the ultimate enemy is Death.

D. What the kingdom is **NOT properly**.

1. The Church militant in this age
2. The rule of God in the hearts of believers
3. An spiritual rule to be consummated in an earthly millennial reign
4. A geo-political or social program in this age or a program of Christianizing all spheres of life
5. **However:** the power and influence of the kingdom is currently felt in these areas.

E. Reformed Confessions:

1. Heidelberg Catechism:

Q123: What is the second petition?

A123: Thy kingdom come; that is, so govern us by your Word and Spirit, that we submit ourselves to you always more and more; preserve and increase your Church; destroy the works of the devil, every power that exalts itself against you, and all wicked devices formed against your Holy Word, until *the fullness of your kingdom come*, wherein you shalt be all in all. [emphasis added]

2. Westminster Shorter Catechism (cf. WLC 191.):<sup>12</sup>

Q102: What do we pray for in the second petition?

A102: In the second petition, which is, Thy kingdom come, we pray, That Satan's kingdom may be destroyed; and that the kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it, and kept in it; and *the kingdom of glory* may be hastened. [emphasis added]

F. Not only confessional Reformed, but much more broad. For example, the **Nicene Creed** in its second section on the only-begotten Son has this sequence:

[W]ho for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended

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<sup>12</sup> See WCF VIII, WSC 26, and WLC 45 for Christ as King.

into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; *whose kingdom shall have no end.* [emphasis added]

**V. KINGDOM ILLUSTRATED: HEBREWS 2:5–17**

**A. KEY: Heb 12:26–28:**

**B. Outline of points for Heb 2:5–17:**

1. “Kingdom” word not found, but conception is main theme of passage.
  - a. World to come (v. 5)
  - b. subjected (v. 5)
  - c. crowned with glory and honor (vv. 6–10)
2. Christ, because of completed priestly offering, has:
  - a. Himself entered the kingdom in glory
  - b. Brings “many sons to glory”; i.e., has established citizens who will receive an unshakable kingdom
3. Hence, the kingdom has not fully arrived (“we do not see him”)
4. But the kingdom has been unshakably established (“yet we do see Jesus”)

**VI. CONCLUSION**

**Heb 10:12–14:** “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”

**Heb 13:20–21** (ESV alt.): “Now may the God of peace who led up from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep [*reading this as an ancient royal title*], by virtue of the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with every good thing to do his will, working in us that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

**1 Cor 15:50:** “I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the corruptible inherit incorruptibility. . . . For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.”