

THE CHURCH AND THE KINGDOM: A Study of their Relationship in Scripture, Tradition, and Evangelization

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One of the chief sources of confusion and conflict in contemporary missiology is the proliferation of new opinions about the kingdom of God. Some authors understand the kingdom as indivisibly connected with the Church and with Christ while others look on it as separable from the Church and even from Christ. In order to bring some light on this debated question I propose to examine, initially, the biblical and theological data on the presence of the kingdom within history and at the close of history. In a second section I shall speak more specifically of the relation of the kingdom both to Christ and to the Church as taught in Scripture and in the tradition of the Church. Then I shall take up what twentieth-century secularization and liberation theology have to say on our theme and how the Catholic magisterium has responded to these proposals. Finally, I shall draw some conclusions pertinent to missionary evangelization, the theme of the conference for which this paper was originally prepared.¹

The term “kingdom of God” is a biblical metaphor used in the Gospels with connotations derived both from Jewish apocalyptic literature and from rabbinic teaching. In the apocalyptic tradition it generally denotes a sudden, catastrophic event produced by God alone, introducing a radically new order and putting an end to history as we know it. The rabbis, for their part, tend to understand the kingdom as a divinely willed order realized in some degree within history through the faithful observance of the Torah. Some rabbinic texts connect the kingdom with the advent of the Messiah and the restoration of Israel as a political power. Although these pre-Christian traditions are not determinative for the New Testament, they give valuable background for understanding the ways in which Jesus and his contemporaries speak of the kingdom.

The theme of the kingdom, which is central to the proclamation of John the Baptist and Jesus, takes on a specifically Christian meaning in light of the person and mission of Jesus.² This meaning, however, is very flexible. In the Gospels it

¹ An earlier version of this paper, prepared for the symposium on “The Church: Salvation and Mission,” held at Mundelein, Illinois, October 11–13, 1991, was published in Eugene Laverdiere, ed., *A Church for All Peoples* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 13–27. This paper has been revised to reflect subsequent developments in scholarship and Catholic teaching.

² The literature on the kingdom of God in the Gospels is too vast to be surveyed here. Several books are particularly useful for the present project: Rudolf Schnackenburg, *God’s Rule and*

seems to include any or all of the eschatological blessings, especially those manifestly brought about through Jesus the Messiah. After the resurrection this metaphor recedes to a secondary position in Christian discourse. The primary content of Christian proclamation is no longer the kingdom but rather Jesus Christ, in whom the kingdom of God is dynamically present. In proclaiming Christ, the Church is announcing the kingdom in a new way, for it is in him and through him that God chooses to reign. Christ is often called King or Lord.

The term *basileia* in the Greek New Testament frequently means kingship (reign) but it must sometimes be translated as kingdom (realm). The two concepts are inseparable. Christ's kingship or lordship implies a community over which he reigns—in other words, a kingdom. Conversely, the concept of the kingdom always implies a king. Several different expressions such as "kingdom of God," "kingdom of heaven," "kingdom of the Son," and "kingdom of Christ" are used almost interchangeably in the New Testament; the differences of nuance among them need not concern us here.

On the basis of the New Testament texts, theologians have concocted a variety of theories about the relationship between the kingdom and historical time. Some prefer to reserve the term "kingdom" for the final eschatological reality achieved when Christ "delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power" (1 Cor. 15:24). This purely futurist interpretation, while supported by some texts, stands in tension with others that refer to the kingdom as something that has already broken into the world in the ministry of Jesus. For example, Jesus is reported as saying: "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20; Matt. 12:28). After his resurrection, Christ enters into the fullness of his kingdom and sends forth his Spirit upon the community of the disciples, which becomes a zone where he reigns in a special way.

Drawing upon this rich array of texts, most theologians hold that the kingdom exists not only in heaven or in the eschatological future but also, in an imperfect way, within time on earth. It was present incipiently in the public ministry of Jesus and continues to be present in the Christian community since the resurrection. The kingdom will come into its definitive phase in the age to come.

Some theologians write as though the Church were a purely human organization existing before the parousia, whereas the kingdom, they would say, is an eschatological reality to be consummated at the end of time. Wolfhart Pannenberg, for instance, writes:

Kingdom (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963); Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); Jean Carmignac, *Le Mirage de l'Eschatologie: Royauté, Règne et Royaume de Dieu . . . sans Eschatologie* [The Mirage of Eschatology: Kingship, Reign, and Kingdom of God . . . Without Eschatology] (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1979); and Bruce Chilton, ed., *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

Certainly the Kingdom of God is not the Church. Indeed it is quite possible to conceive of the Kingdom of God without any Church at all. The Kingdom of God is that perfect society of men which is to be realized in history by God himself. In Revelation, Saint John the Divine envisions such as society in which there is no need for church or temple. . . . Christ points the Church toward the Kingdom of God that is beyond the Church.³

Hans Küng, while he recognizes that the reign of God is already effective in the Church, maintains that according to modern exegesis it is impossible to speak of the Church as being God's kingdom on earth or the present form of the kingdom of God. It is important, in Küng's view, to stress the basic difference between the Church and the kingdom. To apply to the Church what the New Testament says about the reign of God will lead to an ecclesiology of glory with the Church as its goal, he fears. In a series of contrasts between the Church and the kingdom, Küng declares that the Church grows from below and is definitely the work of human beings. The kingdom, however, comes from above and is definitely the work of God. "*Ekklesia*," he writes, "is a pilgrimage through the interim period of the last days, something provisional; *basileia* is the final glory at the end of all time, something definitive."⁴

Pannenberg and Küng, in my judgment, exaggerate the contrast between Church and kingdom, particularly with regard to the Church, which they understand too narrowly as a this-worldly entity, produced by human effort and destined for extinction at the end of time. This view should be challenged both exegetically and theologically.

The *ekklesia* of the New Testament is a predominantly eschatological reality, given from above. It is the equivalent of what the Old Testament describes as "the assembly of the saints of the Most High" (Dan. 7:27). That assembly will become complete when Christ returns in glory, bringing the faithful into their promised inheritance. The Church is likewise described in terms of metaphors such as the temple that is being built, the body that is growing up into unity with Christ its head, the new Jerusalem that descends from heaven, and the bride adorned for the wedding.⁵

3 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 76–77. Returning to this theme in a later work, Pannenberg describes the Church as a provisional sign of God's coming kingdom, and in some sense a sacrament of the kingdom, but he continues to deny that it is the present form of the kingdom of God. Nor does he develop an eschatology of the Church, as does Vatican II. He rightly rejects the view that the Church is able to bring about the full presence of the kingdom in history. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993): 38–48.

4 Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968), 92–93, at 93.

5 For various images of the Church in the New Testament, see Matt. 21:42; Acts 4:11; 1 Cor. 3:9, 11; Eph 2:19–22; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet 2:5,7; Rev 21:1–3. See also, Second Vatican Council, *Lumen*

None of these images suggests that the Church is destined to be abolished at the end of time. On the contrary, they imply that the Church on earth is merely the initial phase of the consummated, heavenly Church. The glorious consummation described in Revelation 21, to which Pannenberg alludes in the passage quoted above, far from doing away with the Church, establishes it as the new Jerusalem, a city built upon the foundation of the twelve apostles (Rev. 21:12–14). If the city contains no temple, that is because the entire city is a holy reality, suffused with God's transfiguring presence.

Ecclesiology and the Eschatological Kingdom

Throughout the patristic and medieval periods it was generally agreed that, although the Church is currently in a state of pilgrimage, it will come into its own in splendor at the end time.⁶ This eschatological dimension was somewhat lost to view after the Reformation. Almost absent from the theology of the nineteenth century, it was recovered in a number of statements, particularly by Protestants in the World Council of Churches after 1948. The final report of the Lund Conference on Faith and Order (1952)⁷ and the Faith and Order Report received by the Evanston Assembly of 1954⁸ both affirmed that the perfect unity of the Church will be achieved only when the glorious Christ returns to meet his Church.

In Catholic teaching this eschatological renewal of ecclesiology was accomplished, or at least officially endorsed, by the Second Vatican Council. The Council's dogmatic constitution on the Church, asserts of the Church that "at the end of time she will achieve her glorious completion,"⁹ when all the just are gathered together in the universal Church in the presence of the Father. The Church is "the kingdom of God now present in mystery"¹⁰ and she grows visibly in the world through the power of God. The Church "becomes on earth the initial budding forth of the kingdom" and that she "hopes and desires with all her strength to be joined in glory with her king."¹¹ The Council clearly affirms that the Church "will attain her consummation only in the glory of heaven."¹² It also declares that

Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (November 21, 1964), 6, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (Piscataway, NJ: New Century, 1966).

- 6 In this paragraph I summarize material presented at greater length in my article, "The Church as Eschatological Community," in Joseph Papin, ed., *The Eschaton: A Community of Love* (Villanova, PA: Villanova University, 1971), 69–103.
- 7 World Council of Churches, *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order, Held at Lund, August 15th to 28th, 1952*, ed. Oliver S. Tomkins (London: SCM, 1953).
- 8 World Council of Churches, *The Evanston Report, The Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches, 1954*, ed. W. A. Visser't Hooft (New York: Harper, 1955).
- 9 *Lumen Gentium*, 2.
- 10 *Lumen Gentium*, 3.
- 11 *Lumen Gentium*, 5.
- 12 *Lumen Gentium*, 48.

the Church on earth looks forward in hope to the day when she will reign with the glorious Christ, although her sacraments and institutions pertain only to the present age. When Christ appears, "in the supreme happiness of charity the whole Church of the saints will adore God and 'the Lamb who was slain' (Rev. 5:12)."¹³

From these texts it should be evident that the Church teaches that while the kingdom is present in her in a provisional way, she will become most fully herself at the end of history, when the kingdom is finally realized. Whether the glorious consummation of the Church differs from the fullness of the kingdom is a question we shall consider below.

Church and Kingdom: The Biblical Data

The question of the relationship between the Church and the kingdom within history is controverted. The New Testament does not afford materials for a full answer because the kingdom appears chiefly in the Gospels, in which the Church is rarely mentioned, and because the Church is dealt with in other biblical books that say little about the kingdom.

So far as I am aware, there is only one text in which Church and kingdom are mentioned together: "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:18–19). Peter, by one and the same act, is made the foundation of the Church of Christ and the keeper of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The metaphor of binding and loosing reappears in Matthew 18:18: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." "Heaven" in the second quotation may be equivalent to the "kingdom of heaven" in the first. In both texts the correct interpretation may well be that decisions made in the Church on earth have validity for a person's definitive participation in the ultimate kingdom.

In many other biblical passages what is said about the kingdom can easily be interpreted as referring to the Church. For instance Jesus, as reported by Luke, says that "the law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached" (Luke 16:16). Even the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist (Matt. 11:11). Then again, Jesus consoles his "little flock" of disciples because it has pleased the Father to give them the kingdom (Luke 12:32). According to the Fourth Gospel, Jesus teaches the necessity of being reborn by water and the Holy Spirit in order to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3–5). This could be understood as entrance into the Church through baptism.

The Letter to the Colossians speaks of the Christians as having been rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col. 1:13). The Book of Revelation speaks of those ransomed by the blood

¹³ *Lumen Gentium*, 51.

of Christ as having been made “a kingdom and priests to our God” (Rev. 5:10; compare Rev. 1:6). In many of these texts the term “Church” could be substituted for “kingdom” without any evident change of meaning.

The parables of the kingdom in the synoptic gospels bring us into the very difficult area of how the parables are to be interpreted. Many critics hold today that the kingdom must here be interpreted as a poetic metaphor with various levels of meaning. Even so, one level of meaning would seem to refer to the Church. These parables speak of a reality that begins as a small seed, undergoes astonishing growth, and is to be harvested at the end of time. The kingdom, as presented in these parables, seems to encompass both the righteous and sinners, who will be separated from one another at the final judgment. All these attributes fit the Church.

Speaking of Matthew’s vision of the Church, the New Testament exegete John R. Donahue writes:

The Church is a *corpus mixtum*, a body in which the good and the bad are mixed together. Like the mustard seed, it is small and insignificant, but it will become a tree. Its growth is as imperceptible as that of the rising of leavened bread. . . . Therefore, in these parables, which along with [that of] the sower are addressed to the crowds (the potential believers in Matthew’s own day), Matthew explains the paradoxical nature of the Church.¹⁴

Some competent scholars continue to maintain that the Church in the New Testament is identical with the kingdom of God.¹⁵ This opinion is, in my judgment, too narrow. The kingdom, as I have said, is sometimes identified with the work of Christ in his public ministry, even prior to the founding of the Church. At other times, the kingdom is treated as a future eschatological reality. Even after the Church is established, Christians still have to pray for the coming of the kingdom, as they do in the “Our Father.” Then again, Jesus indicates that the kingdom will be taken away from the Jews (Matt. 21:43), but the Jews never possessed the Church. Furthermore, metaphors such as the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price (Matt. 7:44–46), which are depicted as standing for the kingdom, are difficult to apply to the Church. One may conclude then, that while many kingdom sayings in the New Testament can be applied to the Church, the kingdom and the Church do not fully coincide.

¹⁴ John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 67–68.

¹⁵ This is the conclusion of Jean Carmignac, *Le Mirage de l’Eschatologie*, esp. 95–102.

Church and Kingdom: The Patristic and Magisterial Witness

Origen in his commentary on Matthew asserts that Christ, because he is God's wisdom, righteousness, and truth, is the kingdom itself (*autobasileia*).¹⁶ Cyprian, commenting on the words "thy kingdom come" in the Lord's Prayer, says much the same: "It may even be . . . that the kingdom of God means Christ himself, whom we daily desire to come, and whose coming we wish to be manifested quickly to us. For, as he is our resurrection, since in him we rise, so he can also be understood as the kingdom of God, for in him we shall reign."¹⁷

Augustine is often considered the author of the idea that the Church and the kingdom of God are identical. In a number of his sermons and in an important passage from the *City of God*,¹⁸ he aligns the city of God with the Church and the earthly city with the state, especially in its evil aspects, where the state is seen as demonic. But Augustine sometimes points to differences between the Church and the kingdom. He recognizes that in her present form the Church contains an admixture of evil and that she will not be perfected until Christ's return in glory. Gregory the Great, a disciple of Augustine, states that "in Holy Scripture the Church of the present time is frequently called the kingdom of heaven."¹⁹ Medieval theologians such as Hugh of St. Victor identify Augustine's two cities respectively with the spiritual power (the Church) and the secular power (the Empire).

Thomas Aquinas in his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard holds that to be in the kingdom is to be perfectly subjected to God's providence, which orders us to our last end. He then continues: "The kingdom of God antonomastically signifies two things: sometimes the assembly (*congregatio*) of those who are journeying in faith, and in that case it is the Church militant that is the kingdom of God; at other times, the communion (*collegium*) of those who are established in the end, and then it is the Church triumphant that is the kingdom of God."²⁰ In the *Summa theologiae* Thomas does not make a direct comparison between the two terms, but he seems to ascribe the same attributes to both Church and kingdom. At one point, when discussing the kingdom of God, he maintains that Christ's

16 Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, Book 14, Chapter 7, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 9, ed. Allan Menzes (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 498.

17 St. Cyprian, *The Lord's Prayer*, 13, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus. Series Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: Garnier and J.P. Migne, 1844–1864), 4, 528A. Hereafter abbreviated PL. Cyprian is quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2d. ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 2816.

18 Augustine, *City of God*, Book 20, Chapter 9, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, vol. 2, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1866–90), 429–31.

19 Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the Gospels*, Book 1, Homily 17, in PL, 76:1118. Compare his *Morals on the Book of Job*, Bk. 33, Chap. 18, no. 34, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, 143b, 1704 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1979–). Hereafter abbreviated CC.

20 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, Book 4, Distinction 49, Question 1, Article 2, in *Opera Omnia* (Paris, Vivès, 1874), 11, 470.

rule is exercised predominantly through obedience to the inner law of grace.²¹ At another point he declares that the Church as body of Christ is constituted primarily by the grace of Christ the head that flows into the members.²² Thus St. Thomas tends to spiritualize both Church and kingdom and to see them as very similar, if not identical.

The idea of the kingdom of God has undergone many transformations in Protestant theology. Martin Luther, influenced by Augustine, drew a sharp contrast between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, but he saw the two as closely related, inasmuch as God rules to some degree through worldly governments. Many Lutherans and Pietists understood the kingdom of God as a matter of interior faith and devotion, unrelated to public affairs, which belonged to the worldly regime. Liberal Protestants such as Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf Harnack situated the kingdom of God initially in the hearts of individuals, and looked for its completion in the organization of humanity through actions inspired by love. In Walter Rauschenbusch and other proponents of the "social gospel" the Puritans' expectation of the kingdom was blended with democratic ideals. The kingdom came to be seen, to a large extent, as a just and prosperous society brought about through Christian activism. At the end of the nineteenth century Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer rediscovered the apocalyptic features of Jesus' teaching concerning the kingdom.

In the documents of the Catholic magisterium, the kingdom is frequently depicted as in some respects transcending the Church. Pope Pius XI reflected on the relationship in several of his encyclicals. In *Ubi Arcano* (1922) he chose as the motto of his pontificate, "The peace of Christ in the kingdom of Christ."²³ In 1925 he published the encyclical *Quas Primas* on Christ the King.²⁴ In both these encyclicals he pointed out that Christ's empire is all-encompassing; it includes the secular as well as the religious, the temporal as well as the spiritual, the natural as well as the supernatural. The Church, on the other hand, has a limited sphere of authority. Although the Church has the mandate to proclaim to all peoples the law of God in matters of faith and morals, it lacks competence in merely secular affairs and has no direct power over secular rulers. According to Pius XI, therefore, the reign of Christ is not restricted to the Church.

The Second Vatican Council handled the question very circumspectly. The dogmatic constitution on the Church speaks of the Church on earth as "the king-

21 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [Summary of Theology], Part I-II, Question 108, Article 1, Reply to Objection 1 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), vol. 1, p. 1114.

22 Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Pt. III, Q. 8, Art. 6, vol. 2, pp. 2074–80.

23 Pope Pius XI, *Ubi Arcano Dei Consilio*, Encyclical Letter on the Peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ (December 23, 1922), 48, in Claudia Carlen, ed., *The Papal Encyclicals 1903-1939* (Wilmington, NC: McGrath, 1981), 234.

24 Pope Pius XI, *Quas Primas*, Encyclical Letter on the Feast of Christ the King (December 11, 1925), in Carlen, *The Papal Encyclicals 1903-1939*, 271–278.

dom of Christ now present in mystery"²⁵ and states that she "becomes on earth the initial budding forth of the kingdom."²⁶ Church "receives the mission to proclaim and to establish among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God." In this way the Church "becomes on earth the initial budding forth of that kingdom."²⁷ These texts can certainly be read as suggesting that the Church alone is the seed of the kingdom, and that any extension of the kingdom is an extension of the Church, but they do not need to be read in this way. The pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, after declaring that all the values of human dignity, fellowship, and freedom realized in human society will be found eminently in the final kingdom, remarks that the kingdom itself is mysteriously present here on earth.²⁸ The implication would seem to be that the kingdom is mysteriously present even in secular society, since the values just mentioned are secular in character, and since the text makes no reference to the Church.

Perhaps, based on this review of the Church's tradition and magisterium, we should say the following: The heavenly Church, if it differs from the kingdom, will be the heart and center of the ultimate kingdom. The new heavens and the new earth, if they include more than the transfigured Church, exist for her sake, since they will sustain and express the blessed life of the redeemed. They will be the dwelling place of the saints, where they sing the praises of God.

The Kingdom of God and the Secular City

Richard McBrien, in *Do We Need the Church?*, published shortly after Vatican II,²⁹ noted that some of the Council's statements could be read in either of two ways. According to the first reading, which he called "Ptolemaic," the Church is simply identified with the kingdom. According to the second reading, which he termed "Copernican," the kingdom of God, not the Church, must be regarded as central. According to this "Copernican" view, which McBrien regards as biblically and theologically correct, the Church exists for the sake of the kingdom, of which it is a sign and instrument.

This astronomical analogy implies that the Church revolves about the kingdom as does a satellite or planet about the sun. The Church, McBrien says, is "one of the principal agents whereby the human community is made to stand under the judgment of the enduring values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: freedom, justice,

²⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, 3.

²⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 5.

²⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, 5.

²⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (December 7, 1965), 39, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: America Press, 1966): 237–38.

²⁹ Richard P. McBrien, *Do We Need the Church?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

peace, charity, compassion, reconciliation.”³⁰ All are called to the kingdom, he holds, but only some are called to the Church. “Salvation comes through participation in the kingdom of God rather than through affiliation with the Christian Church.”³¹ In McBrien’s estimation, Vatican II, in clinging to elements of the Ptolemaic vision, set itself somewhat at odds with reality, and was far less radical than it ought to have been.³²

McBrien’s book is one of a number of late-1960s works to advance a theology of secularization. In this theology, a sharp contrast was made between the Church and the kingdom of God. What was finally important was not anything specific to the Church, such as faith or worship, but a set of abstract human values that could be accepted by any person of good will: freedom, peace, justice, and friendship. The mission of the Church—if it is legitimate to speak of “mission” at all—was to get people involved in the building of a better human society, along the lines of Protestant theologian Harvey Cox’s notion of the “secular city.”³³ This ideal society came to be dignified with the title “kingdom of God.” Under this way of thinking, it was unimportant whether people believed in Christ, except insofar as belief in Christ might motivate people to work more assiduously for the reconstruction of secular society. In some cases the traditional concept of mission was practically inverted. According to a formula that enjoyed wide currency in the World Council of Churches, the world should set the agenda for the Church.³⁴

A sharp distinction between Church and kingdom is characteristic also of much Latin American liberation theology. An expert in this field, Philip Berryman, after asserting that “the Church is not the kingdom; it is to serve the kingdom,” goes on to say: “That dictum is a kind of first principle of Latin American ecclesiology. . . . The kingdom is a situation in which people can live together as brothers and sisters. The pastoral application is that the church finds its *raison d’être* not in itself but in the community it is to serve. . . . In this context the service of the church consists of the ongoing humanization of the human realm at every level and in every situation.”³⁵

This secular or liberationist theology of the kingdom has had an enormous impact on recent theologies of missionary activity. Paul Knitter, in his influential book, *No Other Name?*, calls for “a thorough overhauling of the traditional model

30 McBrien, *Do We Need the Church?*, 229.

31 McBrien, *Do We Need the Church?*, 228.

32 McBrien, *Do We Need the Church?*, 165.

33 See Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

34 See Walter J. Hollenweger, ed., *The Church for Others* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1967).

35 Philip Berryman, *Liberation Theology* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer Stone, 1987). The final quotation is from Jon Sobrino.

of missionary work." Such an overhauling is now possible, he holds, because of recent advances in the theology of the kingdom:

Christian theology, both Protestant and Catholic, admits that the church is not to be identified with God's kingdom. The kingdom, God's revealing-saving presence in the world, is much broader than the church and also operates through means other than the church. The primary mission of the church, therefore, is not the "salvation business" (making persons Christian so that they can be saved), but the task of serving and promoting the kingdom of justice and love, by being sign and servant, wherever that kingdom may be forming.³⁶

Although the secular, kingdom-centered theology of authors such as Pannenberg, McBrien, Berryman, and Knitter has many eager adherents, its deficiencies have been pointed out by other scholars. Jacques Dupuis, while conceding that the kingdom is broader than the Church, argues persuasively that "the kingdom of God is necessarily Christic in both its dimensions, the historical and the eschatological, the 'already' and the 'not yet.'"³⁷

Kingdom of God, Christ, and the Church in Recent Papal Teaching

The recent popes have emphasized that the kingdom of God is an essentially religious concept, and that it cannot be separated either from Christ or from the Church. Paul VI, in his 1975 apostolic exhortation on evangelization in the modern world, wrote that the Church "reaffirms the primacy of her spiritual vocation and refuses to replace the proclamation of the kingdom by the proclamation of forms of human liberation; she even states that her contribution to liberation is incomplete if she neglects to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ."³⁸

Early in his pontificate, John Paul II quoted his predecessor, John Paul I, as saying: "It is wrong to state that political, economic, and social liberation coincides with salvation, that the *regnum Dei* (kingdom of God) is identified with the *regnum hominis* (kingdom of man)."³⁹ Speaking for himself, John Paul II went on to deplore "the separation which some set up between the Church and the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is emptied of its full content and is understood in a rather secularist sense: It is interpreted as being reached not by faith and membership

36 Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 222.

37 Jacques Dupuis, "The Kingdom of God and World Religions," *Vidyajyoti: Journal of Theological Reflection* 51 (1987): 530–44.

38 Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization in the Modern World (December 8, 1975), 34, in *On Evangelization in the Modern World: Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Dec. 8, 1975 (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1976).

39 "Pope John Paul's Address at Puebla," *Origins* 8 (February 8, 1979): 529–38, at 534.

in the Church but by the mere changing of structures and social and political involvement, and as being present whenever there is a certain type of involvement and activity for justice."⁴⁰

A more formal and complete statement on the nature of the kingdom and its relation to the Church's mission may be found in John Paul II's encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio*. The kingdom of God, he says, "is the manifestation and the realization of God's plan of salvation in all its fullness."⁴¹ In the preaching of the early Church, he declared, the kingdom was rightly identified with Christ.⁴² The kingdom of God, as we know it from revelation, "is not a concept, a doctrine or a program subject to free interpretation but is before all else a person with the face and name of Jesus of Nazareth."⁴³ To proclaim the kingdom, therefore, is to proclaim Christ and the gospel. The kingdom, which was already present in the person of Jesus during his public ministry, is slowly being established in the world as people enter into a mysterious communion with the Lord.⁴⁴

This vision of the kingdom is sharply opposed to the reductionistic versions proposed in secularization theology. In anthropocentric thinking, says the Pope, "the kingdom tends to become something completely human and secularized." Such a view, though it points out certain genuine values that should not be overlooked, "easily translates into one more ideology of earthly progress." In particular, the Pope repudiates conceptions that describe themselves as "kingdom centered" rather than ecclesiocentric. According to these authors, John Paul remarks, the Church must be the "church for others"⁴⁵ and promote values such as peace, justice, freedom, and brotherhood, rather than anything distinctively Christian. I have already given several examples of what the Pope seems to have in mind.

The kingdom of God, according to John Paul II, is not simply the kingdom of man. Christ's kingdom is "not of this world."⁴⁶ To bypass Christ and redemption is to denature the kingdom. The kingdom in its fullness requires authentic values grounded in the mystery of creation,⁴⁷ but above and beyond these human values it includes others that are properly evangelical, since they derive from Christ and the gospel.⁴⁸ Because these latter values are essential, "entry into the kingdom

40 "Address at Puebla," at 534.

41 Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, Encyclical Letter On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate (December 7, 1990), 15, in *The Encyclicals of John Paul II*, ed. J. Michael Miller, C.S.B. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2001).

42 *Redemptoris Missio*, 16.

43 *Redemptoris Missio*, 18.

44 *Redemptoris Missio*, 16.

45 *Redemptoris Missio*, 17.

46 *Redemptoris Missio*, 17; John 18:36.

47 *Redemptoris Missio*, 17–18.

48 *Redemptoris Missio*, 19.

comes through faith and conversion." The gospels, which attest to this, teach also that "the kingdom will grow insofar as every person learns to turn to God in the intimacy of prayer as to a Father . . . and strives to do his will."⁴⁹

These reflections prepare for what the Pope has to say about the relation between the kingdom of God and the Church. The kingdom cannot be detached from the Church any more than it can be detached from Christ, for Christ has endowed the Church, his body, with the fullness of the blessings and means of salvation. The Church has a specific and necessary role in the process of salvation, for it is commissioned to announce and to inaugurate the kingdom among all peoples.⁵⁰

The same pope is willing to say, as did Paul VI, that the Church is at the service of the kingdom.⁵¹ But he makes it clear that this service is accomplished first of all in the proclamation of the gospel. "Proclamation," he writes, "is the permanent priority of mission. . . . All forms of missionary activity are directed to this proclamation, which reveals and gives access to the mystery hidden for ages and made known in Christ."⁵² The Church serves the kingdom preeminently "by establishing communities and founding new particular churches and by guiding them to mature faith and charity."

John Paul does not minimize the value of "human promotion, commitment to justice and peace, education and the care of the sick, and aid to the poor and to children." These concerns pertain to God's kingdom; they legitimately enter into the Church's task as she labors to assist humanity on its journey toward the eschatological goal. But in carrying on these activities, the Pope teaches, the Church "never loses sight of the priority of the transcendent and spiritual realities which are premises of eschatological salvation." The "temporal dimension of the kingdom remains incomplete unless it is related to the kingdom of Christ present in the Church and straining toward eschatological fullness."⁵³

The last formal statement on Church and kingdom that appeared in the pontificate of John Paul II was the declaration *Dominus Iesus*, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith with the Pope's approval in 2000.⁵⁴ Chapter 5 is entitled "The Church: Kingdom of God and Kingdom of Christ." In general, this treatment of our topic follows closely the teaching of Vatican II and

49 *Redemptoris Missio*, 13.

50 *Redemptoris Missio*, 18.

51 *Redemptoris Missio*, 20.

52 *Redemptoris Missio*, 44.

53 *Redemptoris Missio*, 20.

54 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church (Boston: Pauline, 2000). Mention should be made of the treatment of the Church and kingdom in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, issued under John Paul II. Essentially, the *Catechism* reflects the teachings of Vatican II as outlined above. See esp. *Catechism*, nos. 551, 553, 559, 567, 670, 680, 732, 763, 865.

of *Redemptoris Missio*, quoting extensively from both. After acknowledging that the meaning of terms referring to the kingdom varies somewhat in different texts from Scripture and the Fathers, the declaration asserts that in these sources the kingdom and the Church are intimately connected.

The kingdom, it is conceded, is not identical with the Church in her visible and social reality; in fact, it includes liberation from evil in all its forms and the gift of salvation in its fullness. Kingdom-centered theologies and proposals of the “Church for others” are rejected insofar as they fail to recognize that the Church and the kingdom are inseparably bound together.⁵⁵ The Church, according to *Dominus Iesus*, cannot be detached from the kingdom, but is ordered to it as the “sign and instrument” in which the kingdom is mysteriously present. Combining several statements in Vatican II’s dogmatic constitution on the Church,⁵⁶ the declaration intimates that the Church is the sacrament of the kingdom.⁵⁷

Pope Benedict XVI discusses the kingdom of God at some length in his *Jesus of Nazareth*.⁵⁸ While not an exercise of the papal magisterium, the book contains the considered views of a theologian who has been entrusted with the highest responsibility for the integrity of the faith.

When Jesus speaks of the kingdom, Pope Benedict asserts, he is in the first place proclaiming the primacy of God as the living Lord and exhorting his hearers to pray and labor so that God’s will may be done on earth. The Pope is critical of two common approaches. The first, which may be called apocalyptic, is the idea popularized by Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer that Jesus proclaimed the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. The other, which Benedict calls secular-utopian, is the view that the kingdom of God means a just, peaceful, and prosperous society achieved by human effort.

In place of these views, Pope Benedict expresses a preference for the “realized eschatology” of the British exegete C. H. Dodd, who maintained that the kingdom had arrived in the person of Jesus. Echoing the ideas of Origen, Pope Benedict asserts that the kingdom is personally present in Jesus, who is the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price. But in a mystical manner, the Pope recognizes, the kingdom is also present on earth in a seminal way. It exists interiorly and imperfectly in the minds and hearts of the faithful who believe and live in Christ. In addition to the Christological and mystical views, both accepted by Origen, Pope Benedict affirms a third dimension—the ecclesiastical—but in this book he does not thematically discuss the relation between the Church and the kingdom. For his full teaching on this relationship, it would be important to review his earlier

⁵⁵ *Dominus Iesus*, 19.

⁵⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 1, 3, 5.

⁵⁷ *Dominus Iesus*, 18.

⁵⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), esp. 46–63 and 187–90.

writings,⁵⁹ including the official documents published while he was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, notably *Dominus Iesus*.

Ecclesiology, Eschatology, and Evangelization

Because the teaching of the magisterium in Vatican II and under subsequent popes has been so explicit and consistent, a very brief concluding reflection may suffice. It remains for me to make some application to the missionary mandate of the Church. That task consists primarily in evangelization, which should be understood both in the narrow or in the broad sense of the word. In the narrow sense it means an initial proclamation of the gospel to individuals or groups that do not as yet believe in Christ, with a view to making them believers. In the broader sense evangelization and missionary activity include all that serves to bring the values of the gospel to bear on every area of human life, so as to transform persons and cultures, renewing them in Christ, and thus preparing for the glory that is to come.⁶⁰

Evangelizing in both these senses, the missionary serves the kingdom of God. The full service of the kingdom includes the promotion of all those human values that stem from the order of creation and pertain directly or indirectly to the Christian life. Labor for peace, justice, and the alleviation of misery should not be seen as alien to the kingdom and the missionary task. But it will be understood that the social implications of Christianity cannot be adequately understood or achieved without faith in the gospel. Because Christ himself is the perfect embodiment of the kingdom, its preeminent teacher, and the transcendent source of all authentically Christian values, missionaries must be primarily concerned with spreading the knowledge and love of Christ. Where the name of Christ is not proclaimed, the heralding of the kingdom is seriously deficient.

Evangelization necessarily has an ecclesial dimension because it is performed by the Church and builds up the Church. Something of the Church is present, indeed, wherever the values of the gospel are honored. Strictly speaking, however, the Church on earth must be understood as the visible community of men and women who believe in Christ as he has revealed himself and who seek to follow his teaching as disciples. The Church is not a mere means of achieving some higher goal outside herself. As the body of Christ, she is not subordinate to any created reality except the sacred humanity of Christ her Lord. In the eyes of believers, it should be obvious that the kingdom of God cannot be adequately realized apart from the Church. Missionary activity, in seeking to achieve an inner conversion of

59 As a professor at Regensburg, Joseph Ratzinger gave some attention to our theme in his *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 1988), chapters 2 and 3. Although this book has much to say about futurist and realized eschatology, it touches only lightly on the relation of the Church to the kingdom.

60 On the nature of missionary evangelization see the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of The Gospel of Jesus Christ*, in *Origins* 21 (July 4, 1991): 121–35.

hearts and minds to Christ the King, serves the Church. Successfully evangelized Christians will place a high value on the Church's "sacred" activities of faith and worship. But precisely because of their commitment to Christ and the Church, they will not neglect the importance of "secular" values such as justice, peace, and love among all human beings, both within the Church and beyond her visible borders.