



# Response to Questions About The Two Kingdoms

Answered by Dr. Michael Horton

I've been peppered with questions lately, privately and publicly, regarding the doctrine of the "Two Kingdoms": namely, the distinction between Christ's heavenly kingdom and the kingdoms of this age. A lot of good questions have been raised. A lot of silly caricatures have also appeared, which is to be expected. My colleague at Westminster Seminary California, David VanDrunen has a full-length book that Crossway is set to release this winter and a full-scale historical study of the Two Kingdoms in the Reformed Tradition to be published by Eerdmans, both of which will be a lot more helpful than these passing remarks. However, I want to respond briefly to a few of the dominant reactions to this concept. Christians of good will may still disagree over these issues, but it's important to deal with real positions rather than straw opponents.

## Question 1: Isn't this Lutheran?

*The "Two Kingdoms" doctrine is a distinctively Lutheran view.*

Any good, standard history of Christian political ethics (like O'Donovan and O'Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought, 150-1628*) demonstrates that the two-kingdoms motif can be found in the church fathers, especially Augustine (see Robert A. Markus' work), weaves its way in modified versions through the Middle Ages, and is given vigorous voice not only by Luther but also by Calvin and other magisterial reformers.

Augustine himself was more of a "one-kingdom" person early on, sharing his fellow-Christians' confidence in the wake of Constantine's cessation of persecution and adoption of Christianity as the religion of the empire. However, perhaps nudged by experiences (such as the sack of Rome by the pagans and the reproach of latent Roman pagans that abandoning the defeat was due to having abandoned the gods), Augustine rethought the relationship between the two kingdoms. He traced the "two seeds" after the fall, one from Cain (builders of civilization) and the other from Seth (the covenant line), to the reunion of cult and culture in the old covenant theocracy, and its division again in the exile.

The ethics of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount are markedly different from the old covenant that God delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai. Now is not the time of driving out the enemies of God,

but of praying for them and preaching the gospel. It's the era of forgiveness and grace, not of judgment.

“Christendom” (the fusion of the two kingdoms) is the illusion that a common empire can claim the conditional promises that God gave uniquely to the theocratic nation of Israel. Repeatedly, Calvin asserted that these laws were given exclusively to Israel and are no longer binding on Christians or on nation states. “Christendom” is a tough habit to break when your church happens to be favored by the state and your sovereigns are anointed in religious ceremonies like David and his heirs.

So it's not surprising that Christians prefer “one kingdom” when the wind of history is at their back (or so it seems, at least) and “two kingdoms” makes a comeback when the church is persecuted or no longer privileged. Some Christians today seem hostile to the two-kingdoms idea because it undermines some of the motivations for culture warring. America is a Christian nation and it's losing its Judeo-Christian identity. We need to renew our national covenant with God. This is the assumption that I hear from some brothers and sisters in their visceral reactions to this concept. Ironically, many liberal Protestants react for similar reasons. If Christ's kingdom is not to be identified with the church's work of transforming societies, cultures, economies, and political orders, then what else is it for?

I'm not saying that the only reason that the two-kingdoms doctrine is unpopular among Christians is a vague but symbolically powerful cultural dominance. However, the history does suggest some kind of connection to the political winds of the times.

With all due respect to Lutherans, it was Calvinists who argued most strongly for the independence of the church from the state in Geneva, London, Amsterdam, and elsewhere, and defended religious liberties. Among evangelical Protestants at least, Calvinists were directly involved in arguing (along with Quakers and deists) for the separation of church and state.

Trained under Presbyterian stalwart John Witherspoon (a signer of the Declaration of Independence), James Madison used two kingdoms arguments for his case. In fact, he surveyed history to argue that the church itself is healthiest when it is least dependent on state sponsorship and support.

Clearly, Luther drew the lines between the two kingdoms in clear, bold colors, but so did Calvin—and both did so especially over against the radical Anabaptists who were trying to take over cities in the name of Christ's millennial kingdom! Calvin wrote explicitly of the “two kingdoms”: both under the reign of the risen and ascended Christ, but “in different ways”; one, by common grace and the moral law inscribed on the conscience and the other by saving grace and the gospel. Neither Lutherans nor Calvinists have been consistent in working out their theory, but the two-kingdoms doctrine has a substantial body of reflection throughout the whole history of the church.

## Question 2: Is this individualistic?

*The Two Kingdoms view engenders an individualistic and passive view of the church's role in kingdom-living today.*

This concern is based on the assumption that the church as the aggregate of professing Christians is the same thing as the church as the institution founded by Christ for preaching, baptizing, administering Communion, catechizing, and making disciples. In a Reformation perspective, Christ creates his church in the power of his Spirit through Word and sacrament. This is his kingdom of grace. Yet this kingdom of grace will not yet be a kingdom of glory and power until Christ returns. Until then, God's common grace satisfies the needs of believer and unbeliever alike and believers serve alongside their unbelieving neighbors in divinely ordained callings that promote the general welfare rather than the salvation of sinners.

Yes, it is true, we are saved merely by receiving Christ and all of his benefits. That is why faith comes through the preaching of the gospel. We are sitting there, hearing the Good News. God ratifies his promise in baptism and the Supper. Our action in this meeting is to respond, "Amen!" to everything that God has sworn, to praise God from whom all blessings flow, and to be refashioned as characters in God's unfolding drama. "Re-salinated" by God's service to us through his ambassadors, we are dispersed out of the salt shaker and scattered into the world as new creatures. The place for our good works, our activity, our service, is primarily out in the world, not in a plethora of church-based "ministries."

Our Lord credited Mary Magdalene with choosing "the better part" when she sat at Jesus' feet to hear him teach her who he was and what he had come to do, while Martha scolded her sister for making her do all the work. There is a time to receive and then there is a time to pass out the gifts that you have been given. The theater for our good works is in the world, through our ordinary callings, wherever our neighbors (believer and unbeliever alike) need us.

Next time, we'll finish up by looking at one of the most significant objections to the Two Kingdoms view: that it denies the presence of Christ's kingdom today; that it's sort of like dispensationalism: let's just wait until Jesus gets back; that its proponents don't care about transforming the culture here and now.

## Question 3:

# What about the Kingdom of Christ today?

*I'm finishing this series by taking up the most serious objection, namely, that this view denies the presence of Christ's kingdom today. Critics contend that the Two Kingdoms is sort of like dispensationalism: "let's just wait until Jesus gets back." Often the objection gets boiled down to a statement like, "Two-Kingdoms proponents don't care about transforming the culture here and now."*

A lot comes down to how we relate the “already” of Christ’s kingdom to the “not yet” that is still up ahead. I recently read a blog post somewhere in which the author (a mainline Presbyterian) said that dispensationalism is the only thing that mainline Presbyterians have managed to denounce as heresy in the 20th century. I’ve written enough critiques of the dispensationalist way of reading the Bible to dispel any legitimate suspicion of being a closet dispensationalist. However, I think this blogger makes a point. There is a kind of American Protestant activism (fueled especially by Charles Finney and the revivalistic legacy) that regards moral, cultural, and social reform as the main business of the church. If dispensationalism rejects the “already” of Christ’s kingdom, the opposite error is the downplay the “not yet.”

Notice that throughout the Gospels, Christ the King is actually present with his kingdom. And what happens? The outcasts, prostitutes, and other assorted sinners are forgiven and welcomed to the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Even the healings are signs that reveal Christ’s kingdom chiefly as a ministry of salvation from sin, death, and hell. Here, with the King present in person with his kingdom, we might expect the banners to be unfurled, the wicked and the oppressors (whoever we identify as such) driven out and destroyed. Surely, if ever in this present age, we were to expect a total transformation of the kingdoms of this age into the kingdom of Christ, it would have been in Christ’s earthly ministry. Yet he just preaches the gospel, forgives sins, heals the sick, and marches toward the cross.

Nor do we find a blueprint in the New Testament Epistles for a Christian economic or political system, a Christian theory of art or science, or a plan for universal hygiene. The commands are simply to live godly lives in the present, as parents, children, spouses, employers, and employees, caring for the needs of the saints, participating regularly in the public assembly of Christ’s body, and to pray for our rulers.

This does not mean that we may not be called to extraordinary—even heroic—acts of service, or (especially in a democratic republic) to exercise our legal rights to defend justice and engage in acts of charity beyond the communion of saints. Thank God for William Wilberforce, who drew on his Christian convictions as he brought the slave trade to an end in England. Thank God for believers who were great scientists and helped to create greater understanding and advances in medicine. But God should also be thanked for the myriad believers who have simply strived to fulfill their everyday callings as parents, neighbors, workers, volunteers, and friends. Abraham Kuyper spoke of the “little people” of the kingdom, citing examples—like a parishioner: the elderly woman who led him to Christ even though he was her pastor but as yet steeped in liberalism. We will still need government and private sector relief agencies, but it would make a big difference in society if Christians spent more time in their ordinary vocations, caring for

aging parents and growing (perhaps physically or mentally challenged) children, being good neighbors, and fulfilling their calling at work with remarkable skill and dedication.

Furthermore, non-Christians are as likely to be numbered among the great heroes, too. Calvin speaks eloquently of the Spirit's work in common grace of bringing truth, goodness, and beauty in earthly matters to the world through pagans, benefiting us all. It would be "ingratitude toward the Spirit," he says, if we were to ignore these gifts. So in these acts of love and service to our neighbors, Christians are not alone. It is due to God's common grace, but the church is not a common-grace institution. It is not the Rotary Club, UNICEF, or a political action group. The visible church is God's means of bringing his saving grace to the ends of the earth.

It's the Lord's Day again, just in time. It's been a long week of glorifying and enjoying God out in the world, confessing sins, and receiving God's forgiveness for having fallen short. Now it's time to be a recipient of God's public renewal of his vows to us. It's time to come and unburden our load and find in Christ true rest for our souls. But, alas, the pastor has chosen another hobby-horse this week. He's a man with a plan and he imagines that Christ's sheep are his army of volunteers. So here is a weary mom, a frustrated dad with a disappointing relationship at work, an elderly woman who wonders why God still leaves her on earth to suffer debilitating pains. There is a teen-ager with doubts about himself and his faith, even about God's existence. And the pastor is going to set aside the assignment he has been given by his Master in order to call these folks to transform their world, or at least their neighborhood. Not even if that church were full of architects, bankers, redevelopment officers, urban planners, economists, and a mayor or two could it achieve the goal that this pastor has just placed before (and upon) the people under his care.

In a case like this, the pastor is missing several important biblical points: We're in the in-between time right now. Not only are the secular kingdoms still secular (though we still participate in them); we ourselves are still simultaneously justified and sinful. We are not ourselves transformed enough (glorified) to agree upon what a transformed world would look like in all the details, much less to implement it perfectly. Imagine an international, evangelical Christian congress where a plan for transforming the world were to be designed. How long would it take before fights broke out?

I've been in Christian conferences where theologians, ethicists, and pastors presented their imperatives for a new world order and Christian economists in the room hardly knew where to begin enumerating the factual confusion and incoherence, much less the wisdom, of their arguments. In this in-between time, even a non-Christian economist or hospice worker who cares about people will be more of a genuine neighbor to a sufferer than a lot of busy Christians with big plans that are impractical or uninformed.

So why shouldn't Christian economists work alongside their non-Christian partners for solutions to problems in this in-between time? And why shouldn't Christian volunteers serve along side their non-Christian neighbors in the Peace Corps, Hospice, Big Brother/Big Sister, and Little League? Why does everything have to be "Christian"? And why do we have to turn God's service to his flock into a political party convention? I love Bono, but I want my pastor to be Joe Shepherd.

I remember asking the general secretary of the World Council of Churches if his organization still holds to its old slogan, “Doctrine divides; service unites.” Laughing, he said, “Good grief, no. We’ve learned over the decades that service divides. Some think capitalism is the way forward, while others insist on socialism. The pie cuts a thousand ways. But then we’ve found that when we go back to talking about the Nicene Creed or some such thing, there is at least a sense of people coming back into the room and sitting down with each other to talk again.”

Pastors aren’t authorized to create their own blueprint for transformation, but are servants of the Word. Where Scripture has clearly spoken, he must speak. Where it is silent, he must keep his personal opinions and perhaps even learned conclusions to himself. Of course, pastors are called to preach the whole council of God: not only the gospel, but the law—including its third use (to guide Christian obedience). That’s enough to occupy our prayerful action in the world, without piling up commands that God never gave. We’re never called to transform the world (or even our neighborhood). We’re never called even to bring millions to Jesus Christ. We’re called to be faithful in our vocations at work, at home, in our neighborhoods and in our witness to those individuals whom God brings across our path in ordinary ways every day.

One day, this kingdom will extend to every aspect of worldly existence. There will be no tyrants, no pain, no disease, no injustice, no poverty, no idolatry, no oppression. The kingdoms of this world will be made the kingdom of our God and of his Christ and he will reign forever. For now, however, Jesus is gathering guests for his feast, forgiving, justifying, calling, renewing, sanctifying, and sending them out to bring others to the swelling hall. Christ’s reign in grace (through the Great Commission) is a parenthesis in God’s plan. His reign in glory, commencing with his return in judgment and final conquest of the whole earth, will be everlasting.

Of course, we live today in the light of that future hope. This is the message of Romans 8:18-25. To paraphrase Paul, we are stewards of God’s earth, not simply because of God’s creation of the world and of us as its keepers in the past, but also because the whole creation will share one day in the glorious liberty of God’s children. “For in this hope we were saved” (v 24). Yet we also live in the present as those who do not yet see all things subjected visibly to Christ and are all too familiar with the opposition of the world, the flesh, and the devil. “Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (vv 24-25). The indwelling Spirit engenders within us the longing for Christ’s return (v 26).

We are not building a kingdom, but receiving one (Heb 12:28). Even our lives in the world, in our callings, in our witness to our neighbors, is not bringing the future of Christ’s consummated kingdom into the present. Rather, it is God’s means of extending his reign in grace, while we wait expectantly for his return in glory.

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