

THE DANGERS OF KINGDOM ETHICS:  
THEONOMY, PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM, AND SOCIAL-POLITICAL ETHICS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	iii
THE NEED AND PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY.....	1
Theonomy and Progressive Dispensationalism .....	1
The Interdependence of Theology .....	2
The Current Ethical Milieu .....	3
Purpose of this Paper .....	5
SOCIOPOLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD .....	6
An Uneasy Conscience .....	6
The New Evangelical Perspective.....	11
Covenant Theology.....	13
Covenant Premillennialism and Progressive Dispensationalism .....	14
Theological Implications of an Inaugurated-Kingdom .....	19
Social and Political Redemption in the Inaugurated-Kingdom .....	19
Separation of Church and State.....	23
Evaluation of Inaugurated-Kingdom Political Action .....	25
Understanding the Argument.....	25
William Wilberforce’s Political Theory .....	29
Things Old .....	34
Things New .....	37
The Nature of Law.....	40
A Contemporary Occidental Perspective .....	43
An Incomplete Understanding of Justice .....	46

An Inconsistent Understanding of the Kingdom .....	49
SOCIO-POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND THE LAW .....	58
The Problem of the Law .....	58
Discontinuity Positions .....	61
Continuity Positions .....	62
Non-Theonomic Reformed Understanding of the Law .....	63
The Relationship between the Biblical Covenants .....	63
Relationship of the Church to the Body Politic .....	66
Evaluation .....	68
Exegetical Concerns .....	68
Cultural Accommodation? .....	70
Conclusion .....	74
Theonomic Understanding of the Law .....	74
The Abiding Character of God .....	74
Historic Continuity .....	75
The Divine Authority of Government .....	77
Evaluation .....	78
Conclusion .....	80
CONCLUSIONS REGARDING SOCIO-POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT .....	80
Progressive Dispensationalism and Theonomy .....	80
The Missing Element .....	81
Concluding Remarks .....	82
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	84

## THE NEED AND PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

### **Theonomy and Progressive Dispensationalism**

Currently, it seems only those who see any religious activity in the public square as evidence of an impending theocracy would link any form of dispensationalism with reconstructionism. Douthat observes,

When the evidence for Rusdoonian infiltration of the Religious Right grows thin for even the most diligent decoder, the subject is usually changed to the Rapture, another supposed pillar of the emerging theocratic edifice. Premillennarian dispensationalism's emphasis on the imminent collapse of all institutions, foreign and domestic, would seem an odd fit with Reconstructionism's idea of hastening Christ's coming by building his (political) kingdom on Earth. But every 1950s conspiracist knew that when Communists seemed to differ—Tito and Stalin, Stalin and Mao—it only concealed a deeper concord. Similarly, everyone on the Christian Right is understood to be on the same side, no matter their superficial disagreements.<sup>1</sup>

While it is certainly true that “everyone...is on the same side” and that some disagreements between dispensationalists and reconstructionists are “superficial,” it must also be stressed that there are vast differences between the two, admittedly Christian and fundamental,<sup>2</sup> camps. Yet recent movements in dispensationalism have made the association of these two groups less alarmist than it first appears. The fundamental shift in underlying assumptions that took place in the formation of progressive dispensationalism<sup>3</sup> has now made such a

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<sup>1</sup> Ross Douthat, “Theocracy, Theocracy, Theocracy,” *First Things*, August/September 2006, 26.

<sup>2</sup> The use of the word “fundamental” in this context is intended to imply an adherence to the historic fundamentals of the faith, not the religious movement that began as a reaction against modernism in the early part of the last century.

<sup>3</sup> Progressive Dispensationalism is widely recognized to have begun on November 20, 1986 at the first annual meeting of the Dispensational Study Group of the Evangelical Theological Society. For a synopsis of the early meetings of the Dispensational Study Group see Ronald T. Cutter, “Dispensational Study Group: An Introduction,” *Grace Theological Journal* 10 (Spring 1989): 123–24.

linkage, not only possible, but logically necessary. Indeed, an examination of the changing relationship between theonomy and progressive dispensationalism is prudent for several reasons.

### The Interdependence of Theology

“Like every true science, Systematic Theology is interdependent and interrelated in all its parts.”<sup>4</sup> While this observation by Chafer was intended to convey the necessity of an “unabridged” theology,<sup>5</sup> the truth of this statement is not limited to this topic alone. Since Systematic Theology does not utilize “individual texts in isolation from one another,” but instead attempts to “coalesce the varied teachings into some type of harmonious or coherent whole,”<sup>6</sup> one must not view individual doctrines as complete in and of themselves, but rather understand them as part of a network or web of related truths. Therefore, one should expect that when one strand of the web is pulled, there will be movement throughout the rest of the web as well.

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Prolegomena” in *Systematic Theology*, vol. one (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947–48; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 11.

<sup>5</sup> “The astronomer or chemist would not attempt to organize his materials or to reach dependable conclusions with a third of the elements or facts pertaining to his science unaccounted for. Nor should the theologian expect to reach any true estimation of his various doctrines when vast fields of the divine revelation have been eliminated from his consideration. Theologians, more than any other scientists, are apt to be bound by tradition or mere sectarian prejudice. The field of investigation is no less than the entire Bible, which field extends beyond the boundaries of creeds and that limited body of truth which was recovered in the Reformation. Published systems of theology too often omit the dispensational program of God; the Pauline revelation concerning the church which is Christ’s body; the entire field of life truth; Angelology with satanology and demonology; prophecy, which occupies more than one-fifth of the text of the Scriptures; typology; and the present ministry of Christ in heaven. Considering the interdependent and interrelated character of theological doctrine, the theologian, having eliminated all or any part of this great field of revelation, cannot hope to hold truth in its right perspective or to give to it its right emphasis. The aim of every theologian should be to hold the entire divine revelation in a true balance of all its parts and free from fads and inaccuracies.” *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>6</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, unabridged one vol. edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 21.

Understanding the far-reaching consequences of any new doctrinal formulation is usually a process that takes some time. Only rarely are all the ramifications of a doctrinal revision understood early on. This seems to be especially true with regard to progressive dispensationalism. While much ink has been devoted to the implications of progressive dispensationalism in the area of hermeneutics as a whole,<sup>7</sup> considerably less attention has been given to the effects of progressive dispensationalism on the study of ethics, particularly as it relates to the proper use of the Old Testament in general and the Mosaic law in particular in the church age. Yet, the interrelationships that exist between various areas of theology make such an examination advisable.

### The Current Ethical Milieu

The growing acceptance of an inaugurated-kingdom has had a profound impact on contemporary ethical studies. In the last thirty years or so, it has become increasingly popular to link the study of ethics to the concept of kingdom. While this trend is certainly not

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<sup>7</sup> See Bruce A. Baker, "Complementary Hermeneutics And The Early Church" *Journal of Ministry & Theology* 7 (Spring 2003); Baker, "Luke's Use of the Old Testament: An Examination of Attributed Citations," *Conservative Theological Journal* 7 (August 2003); Craig A. Blasing, "The Future of Israel as a Theological Question" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (September 2001); Darrell L. Bock, "Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment" *Trinity Journal* 15 (Spring 1994); Bock, "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New: Parts I & II" in *Rightly Divided: Readings in Biblical Hermeneutics*, Roy B. Zuck, gen. ed., (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996); Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism" in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, Herbert W. Bateman IV ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999); Bock, "Interpreting the Bible" in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-To-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1993); Bock, "The Son of David and the Saints' Task: The Hermeneutics of Initial Fulfillment," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 600 (Oct-Dec 1993); Mal Couch, "Progressive Dispensationalism: What Really Is It?" *Conservative Theological Journal* 9 (August 1999); Ronald N. Glass, "The Parables of the Kingdom: A Paradigm for Consistent Dispensational Hermeneutics" *Michigan Theological Journal* 5 (Spring/Fall 1994); Elliott E. Johnson, "A Traditional Dispensational Hermeneutic" in *Three Central Issues*; Mike Stallard, "Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism" *Journal of Ministry & Theology* 1 (Spring, 1997); Robert L. Thomas, "The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," *Masters Seminary Journal* 6 (Spring 1995).

universal, a quick review of book length treatments on the subject of ethics is illustrative as titles proclaiming such a conjoining of concepts are now common. A quick search for the words “ethics” and “kingdom” on *Amazon.com*,<sup>8</sup> for example, produced nine such titles, all of them written since 1974 and most of them published in the last fifteen years.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, a brief review of book titles is insufficient to accurately gage the magnitude of this trend. Other volumes which do not include these words in their titles make this connection as part of their central argument as well. For example, in *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, Scott Rae argues that the Jesus’ preaching about the message of the kingdom had ethical implications that were quickly addressed since “it was inconceivable to the early church that someone would profess Christ and not adhere to the moral demands of life in the kingdom.”<sup>10</sup>

The adoption of this kingdom understanding is specifically stated in *Kingdom Ethics*: “God’s reign has been *inaugurated* in Jesus Christ, but its ultimate consummation remains a future event. ... Those who live their lives based on the conviction that the New Testament story is truthful, then will understand themselves as living in the time between the times—the

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.amazon.com>, February 20, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Carl E. Braaten, *Eschatology and Ethics: Essays on the Theology and Ethics of the Kingdom of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1974); Bruce Chilton and James I. H. McDonald, *Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); Vernard Eller, *The Promise: Ethics in the Kingdom of God*, (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970); Timothy Gorringer, *Capital and the Kingdom: Theological Ethics and Economic Order* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994); Philip LeMasters, *Discipleship for All Believers: Christian Ethics and the Kingdom of God* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1992); Jim Petersen, *The Insider: Bringing the Kingdom of God into your Everyday World* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2003); R. Scott Rodin, *Stewards in the Kingdom: A Theology of Life in All Its Fullness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000); Glen Harold Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003); John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 29.



eon (of uncertain duration) between the inauguration and consummation of the reign of God.”<sup>11</sup> Other authors merely assume this understanding. Rae, for example, contends:

This does not mean that the church should not attempt to effect [sic] institutional change in society today. That, in fact, is an aspect of the kingdom of God. ... The disciples and others who heard his message seemed to understand the kingdom in its Old Testament context. When the kingdom is fulfilled in its entirety, it will have both an individual and social dimension. ... If the kingdom had a social dimension at its inception and has a social dimension at its culmination, then it seems logical to assume that in the interim, a social dimension will be important, too.<sup>12</sup>

It is the social dimension to ethics in general and the call for institutional change in particular that is of particular interest. Inaugurated-kingdom proponents have taken up the banner of social-political reform based their understanding of an already/not yet kingdom structure.

### **Purpose of this Paper**

It is the purpose of this paper to show that *the shift in assumptions from traditional dispensationalism to an already/not yet understanding of the kingdom necessitates a move towards a theonomist understanding of the Mosaic law and socio-political action*. This paper will attempt to show that modifying one’s view of the kingdom necessitates a modification of the church’s role in society as well. Particularly, adopting an inaugurated (but not yet consummated) view of the kingdom requires the church as a community to engage the socio-political structures of the world in order to invoke institutional change that is in keeping with God’s revealed holiness at Mt. Sinai. Additionally, an alternative (and much older) view of the political impact of the church will be discussed as well, which is in keeping with traditional dispensationalism’s understanding of the church

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<sup>11</sup> Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Rae, *Moral Choices*, 27.

## SOCIOPOLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

### An Uneasy Conscience

The current linking of ethical concerns with an already/not yet understanding of the kingdom has not taken place in an historical vacuum. As early as 1947 Carl F. H. Henry, in his influential *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*,<sup>13</sup> argued for a reconsidered understanding of the kingdom for the express purpose of ethical and social reform.

Henry's primary concern was that the organized Christianity of his day was so fractured along theological lines that it could not speak with one voice regarding the vital ethical and political issues facing the bulk of humanity—issues like the Cold War, the nuclear brinkmanship practiced by the superpowers, labor/management strife, global poverty and famine, racial hatred and discrimination to name a few. Rather than apply itself to social and political engagement, the church was immersed in fraternal debates that dealt with secondary issues at best and trivial issues at worst.<sup>14</sup> The real tragedy, according to Henry, is that few of these theological divisions are primary to the essence of Christianity.

What concerns me more is that we have needlessly invited criticism and even ridicule, by a tendency in some quarters to parade secondary and sometimes even obscure aspects of our position as necessary frontal phases of our view. ... [I]t is needful that we come to a clear distinction, as evangelicals, between those basic doctrines on which we unite in a supernaturalistic world and life view and the area of differences on which we are not in agreement while yet standing true to the essence of Biblical Christianity.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947). It should be noted that the term “fundamentalist” in Henry’s understanding is not the same as the (unfortunately negative) stereotypical image popular today. When he uses this term, it should be understood to be synonymous with “evangelical,” meaning not modernist or liberal—one who still subscribes to the fundamentals of the historic faith.

<sup>14</sup> “In one of the large Christian colleges, a chapel speaker recently expressed amazement that the campus newspaper could devote so much space to the all-important problem of whether it is right to play ‘rook,’ while the nations of the world are playing with fire.” *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi-xvii.

Not only did fundamentalism fail to speak with one voice, at least in Henry's appraisal, it rarely spoke at all. In Henry's scathing assessment, "Fundamentalism is the modern priest and Levite, by-passing suffering humanity."<sup>16</sup> He proclaimed that "evangelical social action has been spotty and usually of the emergency type," with the result that "Fundamentalist opposition to societal ills has been more vocal than actual."<sup>17</sup> What is needed, he said, was a "progressive Fundamentalism with a social message."<sup>18</sup>

Henry insisted that the root of this ethical and social crisis was primarily theological. While applauding the fundamentalist's militant opposition to sin (as opposed to the modernist's belief in the inherent goodness of humanity), he noted that such opposition is almost exclusively directed at "individual sin rather than social evil,"<sup>19</sup> so that "a predominant trait, in most Fundamentalist preaching, is [a] reluctance to come to grips with social evils."<sup>20</sup>

While this critique was leveled at fundamentalism as a whole, a larger theological hurdle existed for two particular segments of fundamentalism.

The problem is even more complicated for the premillennialist and amillennialist. They are convinced not only that non-evangelicals cannot bring in the perfect social order in their methodological context, but also that the evangelicals will not bring it in by their proclamation of the Gospel. This latter conviction is grounded in the belief that the inauguration of the kingdom awaits the second advent of Christ in His visible return.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., xx.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 4.

The amillennialist does not believe in a thousand-year earthly reign, but he shares the despair over the present social order apart from Christ.<sup>21</sup>

This natural pessimism regarding the ultimate effectiveness of social change coupled with a visceral rejection of modernism's social gospel resulted in a theological outlook that denounced as futile and deceptive any grand illusions of world-change prior to the return of Christ. Thus, fundamentalists "redoubled their efforts to rescue the minority from an increasingly hostile environment."<sup>22</sup> Thus, if any movement was to be made with regard to fundamentalist engagement with society, it would have to be primarily a theological movement.

It is important to note that Henry was not advocating a change in the essentials of the faith. He strongly considered these to be non-negotiable. Instead, he sought a re-examination of what he considered peripheral matters that were impeding the more important work of being salt and light. Thus, while he considered orthodoxy to be paramount, he considered orthopraxis the true measure of correct theology. In other words, right thinking will inevitably bring about right behavior—any doctrine that does not produce correct behavior cannot be correct theology.<sup>23</sup> It should be noted in passing that there is a fatal flaw in this line of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 17. While Henry included amillennialism in his assessment of what may be called eschatological pessimism, his main frustration was directed at premillennialists. "But even more serious was the fact that some Fundamentalist workers substituted a familiarity with the prophetic teaching of the Bible for an aggressive effort to proclaim Christ as the potent answer to the dissolution of world culture. As a consequence, they trained enlightened spectators, rather than empowered ambassadors. Prophetic conference, rather than Pentecostal challenge, was their forte." Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>23</sup> "A Fundamentalism from which such a passion is absent becomes an inessentialism. Here, if anywhere, the test of 'negative pragmatism' appears appropriate indeed. If Fundamentalism ceases to 'work,' we have imported into it elements which violate the innermost essence of Christianity." Ibid., 56-57. "Negative Pragmatism" asserts that unless something works, it cannot be true.

thinking. A commitment to *Sola Scriptura* demands that one judge every aspect of life according to the written Word. It is Scripture that determines what is correct thinking as well as correct behavior. Yet in this case, Henry seems to get the cart before the horse. He assumes political and social goals and then objects to those doctrines that are inconvenient to reaching those goals. One suspects that he would vigorously protest such an assessment as an oversimplification. No doubt he would argue that the ends for which he presses are biblical imperatives. Nevertheless, he does not provide the biblical mandate for the political and social action he advocates and one wonders how easy it would be to arrive at his pre-determined conclusions from a strictly biblical argument.<sup>24</sup>

In Henry's view, the principal doctrine that needed re-thinking was the doctrine of the kingdom. As might be expected from Henry's statement above, the premillennialist's and

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<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that an argument for a responsibility cannot be made. This is merely an acknowledgement that, very often, those things that are simply assumed contain fundamental errors. It is not surprising therefore to discover that not everyone has shared Henry's vision of the mission of the church. This author's grandfather—a fundamentalist pastor—regularly quoted the maxim "Christ called us to catch fish, not clean up the pond."

An example of such a presumed but not proven argument for social action is made by Robert Pyne. "Several months ago I found myself in a conversation with a student about the church's responsibility to the poor. I had said something in class about having an obligation to serve the needy, and this fellow challenged me afterward to prove my point from Scripture. I started with Galatians 2:10, but he said that Paul's words about 'remembering the poor' only applied to those suffering in the Jerusalem church. I tried the book of Amos, but he said that was an Old Testament text that didn't apply to the church. He said that Psalm 72 and Matthew 6 provide instruction concerning the millennium, and that Matthew 25 describes standards for those who have gone through the Tribulation. He said that Acts 4 merely reported (but did not endorse) the Jerusalem church's temporary practice of communal living, while James 2 was directed toward Hebrew Christians. I tried 1 John 3, but he was quick to point out that the apostle only calls us to love one another, not to love those who are in the world, and I finally said, 'I'm not sure you and I are reading the same Bible.' He was no longer convinced that I was really a dispensationalist, but I had a bigger concern than that. I was no longer convinced he was really a Christian." Unfortunately, Pyne never goes on to defend his use of Scripture nor to challenge his student's exegesis, but merely discusses dispensationalism's "bad reputation." Robert A. Pyne, "The New Man in an Immoral Society: Expectations Between the Times," in *Evangelical Theological Society Dispensational Study Group* (Santa Clara, CA: 1997). This unpublished paper should not be confused with Pyne's published article in *BSac* 154 (Jul-Sep 1997) by the same name. That article is primarily concerned with the contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr to the church's role in societal change.

amillennialist's pessimism regarding the future were the root of fundamentalist inaction.

Therefore a new understanding of the kingdom was vital to enable the church to be about its task.

[I]t is within the province of this volume to urge upon evangelicals the necessity for a deliberate restudy of the whole kingdom question, that the great evangelical agreements may be set effectively over against the modern mind, with the least dissipation of energy on secondary issues.<sup>25</sup>

Since it was Henry's goal to unite, not divide fundamentalism further, he argued for a compromise position concerning the kingdom. It was evidently his thought that, seeing the kingdom as a non-essential that should not divide, such a compromise was not only possible but necessary. Henry opined,

[T]he burden of these articles is not to press a personal kingdom viewpoint, but rather to promote an evangelical conviction that nothing is so essential among Fundamentalists essentials as a world-relevance for the Gospel. Whatever in our kingdom views undercuts that relevance destroys the essential character of Christianity as such.<sup>26</sup>

Henry rejected coming up with any new theory regarding the kingdom, stating that such "exegetical novelty so late in church history may well be suspect."<sup>27</sup> Instead he advocated a position to which non-dispensational premillennialism and amillennialism already subscribed.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, he was quick to state that "The problem of Fundamentalism then is

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<sup>25</sup> Henry, *Uneasy Conscience*, 46.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>28</sup> "In non-dispensational Fundamentalism, amillennialists and pre-millennialists agree that the kingdom whether earthly or heavenly will be set up not by the flashed sword of Gideon but by the advent of Christ, *though a real spiritual reign is insisted upon in Christ's present relationship to the church*. In dispensational Fundamentalism, the keynote of the postponement theory is 'no kingdom now, but rather a future kingdom.'" *Ibid.*, 42. (emphasis added)

basically not one of finding a valid message, but rather of giving the redemptive word a proper temporal focus.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, Henry proposes an already/not yet understanding of the kingdom to provide the necessary focus for cultural engagement.

No study of the kingdom teaching of Jesus is adequate unless it recognizes His implication both that the kingdom is here, and that it is not here. This does not imply an ultimate paradox, but rather stresses that the kingdom exists in incomplete realization.<sup>30</sup>

The extent to which man centers his life and energy in the redemptive King *now* determines the extent of the divine kingdom in the present age.<sup>31</sup>

### The New Evangelical Perspective

The already/not yet paradigm advocated by Henry was quickly taken up in other circles. George Eldon Ladd, for example, brought his considerable exegetical and theological expertise to bear in furthering this concept of the kingdom.<sup>32</sup> As might be expected, Ladd’s arguments for a new understanding of the kingdom did not meet with a universally favorable response. The now famous debate between John Walvoord and George Ladd lasted throughout

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

<sup>32</sup> For a more complete understanding of Ladd’s understanding of the kingdom see George Eldon Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God; The Sixth Annual Mid-year Lectures of 1952 delivered at Western Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary of Portland, Oregon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom; Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), George Eldon Ladd, “The Kingdom of God — Reign or Realm,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* LXXXI (1962), George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), George Eldon Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1977). For interactions with Ladd’s view from other theological perspectives see the responses of Herman Hoyt (dispensationalist), Anthony Hoekema (amillennialist), and Loraine Boettner (postmillennialist) in Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1977).

the 1950's and 60's.<sup>33</sup> Since that time, however, “evangelical theology’s ‘cold war’ over the Kingdom has thawed dramatically.”<sup>34</sup> Primarily through the interaction between dispensational and covenant theologians facilitated by the Dispensational Study Group of the Evangelical Theological Society, a new consensus has emerged that is almost identical to what Henry envisioned. This new evangelical consensus “maintains that the inauguration and consummation of the kingdom has an ontological and metaphysical reality and is discovered

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<sup>33</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. and expanded. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 40. This debate was related to the theology of the kingdom but had at its core a significant disagreement about hermeneutics. Walvoord insisted that Ladd’s hermeneutic would lead to a denial of Scripture. Walvoord maintained that “the diverse theological systems of Roman Catholic, modern liberal, and modern conservative writers are found to be all using essentially the same method. To be sure, the modern liberals who no longer hold to verbal inspiration do not need to spiritualize the Scriptures to arrive at their interpretation. They can simply declare the Scriptures in error and go on. But the first inroad of liberalism in the church historically in Origen, and in modern times as well, has been by subverting the meaning by spiritualizing the words. While no doubt other errors are found in these three widely differing theological positions, their respective theologies could not have the variance that exists if each interpreted the Scriptures literally.” John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham Pub. Co., 1959), 71-72. Ladd responds, “This amounts to the claim that only dispensationalism, with its literal hermeneutic of the Old Testament, can provide a truly evangelical theology. In my view this simply is not true.... The liberal admits that the New Testament teaches the bodily resurrection of Christ, but his philosophical presuppositions make it impossible for him to accept it. On the other hand, B. B. Warfield was the greatest exponent of a high view of biblical inspiration of his day. He was prepared to accept any doctrine which could be proved by the Scriptures. If he ‘spiritualized’ the millennium, it was because he felt a total biblical hermeneutic required him to do so. This is not liberalism. It is a question where equally evangelical scholars who accept the Bible as the inspired Word of God should be able to disagree without the accusation ‘liberal.’” Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” 19-20.

<sup>34</sup> Russell Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 23. It should be noted that some find this consensus much earlier. Mark Saucy, for example, contends, “In just what way the Kingdom was present and future was still a matter for debate, but at least this issue seemed settled by the early 1960s.” Mark Saucy, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus in 20th Century Theology* (Dallas: Word, 1997), 21. In 1974, Ladd, citing a list of over forty different scholars subscribing to an already/not yet view, declares, “So extensively is this synthesis to be found that we must recognize it as an emerging consensus.” Ladd, *Presence of the Future*, 38-39 n 161. As early as 1962, Ridderbos remarks that a “Christological” view of the kingdom and the “reality of its presence” has “found expression in all kinds of ways in the recent literature.” Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), xxviii.



through an authoritative divine revelation.<sup>35</sup> Progressive dispensationalists, initially led by Darrell Bock, Craig Blaising, and Robert Saucy have joined with covenant theologians such as Anthony Hoekema, Vern Poythress, Edmund Clowney, and Richard Gaffin to relate their “doctrinal distinctives to the overarching theme of the Kingdom of God as an integrative motif for their respective systems.”<sup>36</sup> In fact, “[t]he newer arguments of modified covenantalists thus sound quite similar, if not identical, to those of progressive dispensationalists.”<sup>37</sup> This theological movement, however, has been more natural for the covenant theologians than for the dispensational ones.

### Covenant Theology

While there has been many pages devoted to the movement in dispensational theology, considerably less has been committed to the corresponding changes in covenant theology. Nevertheless, Gaffin maintains that “the rediscovery of the already/not yet structure of New Testament eschatology” has been “one of the most important developments in biblical studies in this century” and “has now virtually reached the status of consensus....”<sup>38</sup> An argument can be made that the “already/not yet structure of New Testament eschatology” is better termed a re-development rather than a rediscovery. Ridderbos amply demonstrates the historical movement of inaugurated-kingdom theology since the late nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup> Thus, Stonehouse remarks, “When Ridderbos concludes that the kingdom of God involves both

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<sup>35</sup> Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 55.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>38</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, “A Cessationist View,” in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, ed. Wayne A. Grudem, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 29.

<sup>39</sup> Ridderbos, *Kingdom*, xi-xxxii.

a present and a future aspect, nothing especially startling is disclosed.”<sup>40</sup> Still, while there has been something of a broad consensus in the past, contemporary covenant theologians seem to be coalescing around a common view of inaugurated eschatology. Since this movement has more to do with the present than the future, differences concerning the consummated kingdom have taken somewhat of a backseat to the broad agreement concerning the current manifestation of the kingdom.<sup>41</sup>

### Covenant Premillennialism and Progressive Dispensationalism

Unlike the movement in covenant theology, the movement in dispensationalism has been more dramatic. As with Ladd’s contribution to kingdom theology, progressive dispensationalism has been controversial since its inception. One (of several) reasons for this is its close kinship with Ladd’s inaugurated eschatology.<sup>42</sup>

From the very first discussions of progressive dispensationalism, the idea was put forth that these new formulations of traditional dispensational thought were a natural development of this system of theology.<sup>43</sup> Blaising argues that this reformulation was part of

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., back cover.

<sup>41</sup> “As developing Reformed theology has appropriated this eschatological view of the resurrection, it has emphasized the ‘already’ of the ‘already/not yet’ Kingdom in the present reality of the Holy Spirit.” Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 48.

<sup>42</sup> This abbreviated comparison of covenant premillennialism and progressive dispensationalism is taken from a much expanded investigation in Bruce A. Baker, “Is Progressive Dispensationalism Really Dispensational?,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, ed. Ron J. Bigalke (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Darrell Bock divides the recent history of dispensationalism into three categories: “Scofieldian dispensationalism,” which reflects the approach of the 1909 and 1917 editions of *The Scofield Reference Bible*, “Essentialist dispensationalism,” which applies to those subscribing to the approach of later dispensationalists, particularly those who hold to Ryrie’s *sine qua non* description of the fundamental elements of dispensationalism, and “Progressive dispensationalism,” which focuses on the progress of revelation, so that each subsequent dispensation represents “progress” in the unified plan of God. (Darrell L. Bock, “The Son of David and the Saints’

the routine development of doctrine and should be viewed as a normal and healthy correction.<sup>44</sup> In fact, he contends that dispensationalists should be some of the ones most ready for such doctrinal development.<sup>45</sup>

What some call “development,” however, others call change and radical change at that. Gentry, who considers himself a progressive,<sup>46</sup> rightly describes the magnitude of the change.

Traditional dispensational theologians (e.g. Charles Ryrie and John Walvoord) are feeling the effects of the radical changes within dispensationalism and of the relentless assaults from without. Classic dispensationalism—as the older position is becoming known—is undergoing a paradigm shift. The shift is so radical that Ryrie ... and Walvoord

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Task: The Hermeneutics of Initial Fulfillment,” *BSac* 150 (1993): 440 n 1.) This author uses the term “Traditional” when describing the dispensationalism of Ryrie and his contemporaries, following the categories in Herbert W. Bateman IV, in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999).

<sup>44</sup> “Given the nature of the theological task, orthodox doctrinal development generally is to be expected and encouraged according to a properly understood method of development....Dispensationalism (which maintains an identity within orthodoxy) is undergoing development in the work of contemporary dispensational scholars. Putting these two points together, this development of dispensationalism should be both expected and encouraged in accord with a properly understood method of development.” Craig A. Blaising, “Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy,” *BSac* 145, no. 578 (1988): 136.

<sup>45</sup> “Actually dispensationalists because of their place in the history of doctrine should be the most concerned for proper orthodox doctrinal development and should encourage the present application of the same principles that brought into being the dispensational synthesis. Dispensationalists should be open to, sensitive to, and ready to entertain any future development of theology based on a proper theological method, giving primary consideration to the ongoing work of interpreting the Scripture. Many dispensationalists are encouraging this, and that is why development can be seen within the system.” Craig A. Blaising, “Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists,” *BSac* 145, no. 579 (1988): 256.

<sup>46</sup> “Having read much on both sides of the classic/progressive debate, I find myself being more impressed with the case for progressive dispensationalism than with the fading classic version.” Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., “Review of *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. by Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master,” *JETS* 39, no. 3 (1996): 495.

... deny the new view is even dispensationalism. The changes represent systemic alterations that would have been declared “liberal” in tendency twenty years ago.<sup>47</sup>

While it seems to be almost self-evident that there is disagreement concerning the Scriptural basis for the doctrinal distinctives of progressive dispensationalism,<sup>48</sup> it is important to note that the issue of whether progressive dispensationalism is actually “dispensational” is also contested. While progressives would insist that progressive dispensationalism is a natural development in the historical stream of dispensationalism, others both within and without the dispensational camp would disagree. Ryrie, for example, states that, “progressive dispensationalism certainly appears to be more than a development within normative dispensational teaching. Some so-called developments are too radical not to be called changes.”<sup>49</sup>

What is interesting to note, however, is not simply the charge that dispensationalism as a system has been abandoned, but the frequency that progressive dispensationalism is called “covenant premillennialism.”<sup>50</sup> For example, Willem VanGemeren (a covenant theologian<sup>51</sup>)

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.: 494.

<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the “doctrinal development” of progressive dispensationalism has not been well received by traditional dispensationalists. Ryrie considers progressive dispensationalism an “aberration” (Charles Ryrie, “Update on Dispensationalism,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 20.) and an “abandonment of what has been previously known as dispensationalism.” (Ibid., 41.) Walvoord charges that “progressive dispensationalism, as it is called, is built upon a foundation of sand” and “is lacking specific scriptural proof.” (John F. Walvoord, “Biblical Kingdoms Compared and Contrasted,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Masters (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 90.) Zane Hodges contends that, “Were it not for the fact that serious men have proposed this view, it might well be dismissed out of hand.” Zane C. Hodges, “A Dispensational Understanding of Acts 2,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 174. Lest one think that the arrows fly in only one direction, Blaising dismisses these critics by insisting, “Over the past three decades, the signs of doctrinal development have clearly appeared within the dispensational system itself. But some dispensationalists still find themselves unprepared for this development and unable to contribute constructively in the proper work of theology.” Blaising, “Development of Dispensationalism,” 256.

<sup>49</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 178.

<sup>50</sup> Technically speaking the name “covenant premillennialism” is a misnomer since Ladd isn’t a covenant theologian. His view is similar, however, to covenant theology in that he regards the whole purpose of

draws attention to the fact that “Bock agrees with covenant theology that the eschatological kingdom was inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus and is evidenced in his rule over the church.”<sup>52</sup> Waltke, responding to Turner’s statement that there is an “essential transdispensational continuity of Israel and the church as the one people of God,”<sup>53</sup> responds, “That position is closer to covenant theology than to dispensationalism.”<sup>54</sup>

It should be no surprise that progressive dispensationalism as a whole has moved closer to covenant theology since that seems to be one of the stated goals of the movement. It is not coincidental that Saucy’s treatise on the subject has as its subtitle, “The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational thought.”<sup>55</sup> Yet, it is not merely the movement toward covenant theology that has been observed. Elwell is more specific. He observes, “the newer dispensationalism looks so much like nondispensationalist premillennialism that one struggles to see any real difference.”<sup>56</sup> Elwell is not alone in this assessment. Nichols concludes,

Bock’s views on the kingdom and present session of Christ are a return to the theology of George Eldon Ladd. Consequently, progressive dispensationalism, insofar as

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God as essentially soteriological and concerned with the unfolding of the plan of salvation. Thus, while the name “historical premillennialism” might be more technically accurate, the majority usage seems to be settled upon “covenant premillennialism.”

<sup>51</sup> “[This response] is also an unambiguous statement of my commitment to Reformed Theology.” Willem A. VanGemeren, “A Response,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and The Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 334.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> David L. Turner, “The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1–22:5,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and The Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 288.

<sup>54</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, “A Response,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and The Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 348.

<sup>55</sup> Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

<sup>56</sup> Walter A. Elwell, “Dispensationalisms of the Third Kind,” *Christianity Today*, 12 September 1994, 28.

Bock's influence, is rooted in concepts foreign to dispensationalism. It is not simply a further development of this system of theology, but a capitulation marking a movement toward covenant theology."<sup>57</sup>

One might ask why it is that so many different people representing such a variety of theological positions would come to the same conclusion, namely that progressive dispensationalism is closer to covenant theology than dispensationalism, and that it is virtually identical to covenant premillennialism. While it is important to strenuously avoid the fallacy of determining truth by counting noses (*Argumentum ad numerum*), there must be some significant evidence for the contention that progressive dispensationalism is really Laddian for so many having adopted it. Upon investigation it can be seen that there is significant justification for this viewpoint. Dean summarizes the evidence well.

It is apparent that significant similarities between Bock's view of the kingdom and Ladd's view are present. (1) Both see a present/spiritual and future/literal form of the kingdom. (2) Both deny the offering of the kingdom by Jesus and its rejection by the Jews. (3) Both see the matter of salvation as central to the present reign of Christ and form of the kingdom. (4) Both identify the work of Jesus and the disciples who preached the kingdom in the Gospels as the presence of the Kingdom. (5) Both interpret Acts 2 and 3 as indicating that the session at God's right hand is Christ's inauguration as Messiah on David's throne. Thus both identify the throne of God and the throne of David as one and the same. (6) Both see Psalm 110 as a prophecy of the enthroning of Messiah on David's throne, and both see it as presently fulfilled.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, "Already Ladd — Not Yet Dispensationalism: D. Bock and Progressive Dispensationalism," in *Eastern Regional Conference of The Evangelical Theological Society* (Philadelphia, PA: 1993), 2-3. Similarly, Poythress suggests that "their position is inherently unstable." As a result, he foresees the demise of progressive dispensationalism. "I do not think that they will find it possible in the long run to create a safe haven theologically between classic dispensationalism and covenantal premillennialism. The forces that their own observations have set in motion will most likely lead to covenantal premillennialism after the pattern of George E. Ladd." Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1994), 137.

<sup>58</sup> David A. Dean, "A Study of the Enthronement of Christ in Acts 2 and 3" (Master's Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992), 114. To be fair, Dean also mentions "significant differences" that remain between Ladd's position and that of Bock. "(1) As Bock himself points out, Ladd emphasizes the dynamic nature of God's kingdom, without discussing a realm. (2) Ladd identifies the church as the new Israel, while Bock does not. (3) Ladd insists that the only Scriptural basis for an 'actual millennium' is Revelation 20:1-6, while Bock as a dispensationalist sees prophecy of the millennium in many Old Testament passages. (4) Ladd sees the kingdom beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist; Bock sees it beginning essentially with the ascension, though he

## Theological Implications of an Inaugurated-Kingdom

### Social and Political Redemption in the Inaugurated-Kingdom

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too has argued that it was present in some form previous to this.” Ibid., 114–115. A careful examination, however, will show that these “significant differences” are not really as different as they seem. For example, while it is true that Ladd emphasizes reign instead of realm to avoid comparison with continental NT scholars who argued for a transcendental existence for the kingdom, he nevertheless spoke of “at least three realms antecedent to the coming of the ultimate glory when God’s reign is perfectly realized, and for which the others are preparatory.” Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God*, 85. Ladd contends, “Because of Christ’s life and death, men may enter into the realm of God’s reign, the realm of salvation, the realm of messianic blessing and know release from Satan’s power as God’s reign becomes an effective power within them.” Ibid., 97. Therefore, while Ladd may describe his view of the kingdom as one of God’s rule, in reality it appears to be a description of the power of God at work in the present. This power is bringing about the conditions for the future consummation of the kingdom and it is this power which allows his redeemed people to share in some of the blessings of the future kingdom in the present age. In this sense, Ladd contends when one believes the Gospel, one enters into the blessed realm of a kingdom that is really present but that has not yet been completely established. In comparison, when one reads Bock, it is difficult to see any meaningful differences concerning the present form of the kingdom. In fact, the idea of realm is almost completely absent from his initial discussion of progressive dispensationalism in “The Reign of the Lord Christ.” Darrell L. Bock, “The Reign of the Lord Christ,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). Of the four times he uses the world realm, twice is merely to distance himself from Ladd. Even the name of the essay shows Bock’s emphasis upon the reign of Christ.

It is also true that Ladd identifies the church as the new Israel, while this claim is not explicitly stated by progressive dispensationalists. Nevertheless, the discontinuity espoused in Ryrie’s *sine qua non* (Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 39–40.) is completely rejected. Instead of a distinction between Israel and the church, they see a unity between Jew and Gentile in Christ as “partial fulfillment of Old Testament promises” to Israel. Robert L. Saucy, “The Church as the Mystery of God,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 151. This “unity of Gentile and Jew in Christ” is the “fulfillment of the divine salvation promised for messianic times, when the nations along with Israel would enjoy God’s blessing.” Ibid., 155. Thus, the church is seen as a progression in God’s program for God’s people (hence the name “progressive” dispensationalism). According to Glenny, “there is a divinely ordained pattern between Israel and the church (as the people of God), and there is escalation or advancement in God’s program of salvation history from the lesser Old Testament type to the greater New Testament antitype.” W. Edward Glenny, “The Israelite Imagery of 1 Peter 2,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 180. Thus, while the church is a replacement of Israel, it is also an extension of it, a natural progression in the outworking of God’s unified plan.

Dean is correct, however, in identifying the one major distinction between covenant premillennialism and progressive dispensationalism. Since Ladd saw the church as the new Israel, the future blessings promised to Israel were transferred to the church. Therefore, OT promises did not relate to the millennium. Progressives still see the OT promises as physical promises yet to be fulfilled even though they have begun to be fulfilled in a spiritual way in the church. Saucy, “Mystery,” 151.

As has been mentioned previously, the inter-relatedness of theological truths makes understanding the necessary implications of any new doctrinal formulation difficult in the short run. Only after a period of extended reflection do the consequences of “doctrinal development” become clearer. Still, “[n]ow that enough books and articles have been written by progressive dispensationalists, it is fair to highlight some important matters omitted or slighted in their system.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, examining the close relationship between progressive dispensationalism and covenant premillennialism with an eye towards socio-political ethics is an exercise that is far from merely academic. One would expect, for example, that an adoption of Henry’s and Ladd’s inaugurated-kingdom theology would necessitate an adoption of their political system. In other words, a shared understanding of the present kingdom would require a shared understanding of what it means to be a Christian in the present age. In fact, not only has this happened, social-political engagement by the church is a stated goal of the movement.

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<sup>59</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 176. One such omission noted by Ryrie is the relationship between signs and wonders and an inaugurated-kingdom. “Noncharismatic progressive dispensationalists have not faced the question as to why signs and wonders are not characteristic of the church age if in fact Christ is already on David’s throne. During our Lord’s earthly life many signs validated His claim to be the promised Davidic king for Israel. Now that He is allegedly reigning as Davidic king (according to progressives), why are there not miraculous signs happening today in the ‘already’ stage of His Davidic reign?” Ibid., 177. Indeed, proponents of an inaugurated-kingdom have been steadily moving toward charismatic theology. Moore, commenting on the assertion that Christ is currently reigning from David’s throne writes, “This also presents evangelical eschatology with a more biblically focused understanding of the relationship between the inaugurated-kingdom of the resurrected Jesus and the dawning of the Spirit, a problem for both traditional dispensationalists and covenant theologians. The newer consensus offers just such a corrective attention to pneumatology. Ironically, this focus may well mean that the most enthusiastic scholarship in the area of evangelical pneumatology may come from the Dallas and Westminster traditions, the very ones who have held most tenaciously to the cessation of the sign gifts even as the rest of the evangelical coalition has grown more and more influenced by Pentecostalism and ‘third wave’ charismatic ideas.” Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 58. Likewise, Mark Saucy maintains, “The Kingdom is present in the signs the Holy Spirit performs; the Kingdom’s presence is a dynamic, spiritual power. Questions will always be raised to the Third Wave as to the precise nature and purpose of the Spirit’s power for the church today, especially given its popular context and lack of theological sophistication in general. But the emphasis on looking for the Kingdom’s praxis in the work of the Holy Spirit seems justifiable.” Saucy, *Kingdom of God*, 306. For a more complete discussion of this topic, particularly with regard to progressive dispensationalism, see Bruce A. Baker, “Progressive Dispensationalism & Cessationism: Why They Are Incompatible,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, ed. Ron J. Bigalke (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2005).



Pyne concedes that social disengagement is not demanded by dispensationalism.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, he maintains that dispensationalism has provided a “theological loophole for those whose understanding of social ethics had been thrown out of balance by sin, controversy and culture. In recent years progressive dispensationalists have attempted to close the loophole.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Carroll argues that the “social ethics vacuum of classic dispensationalism” has brought about the reconsideration of “the reality of the presence of the kingdom of God today.”<sup>62</sup> This “reality of the presence of the kingdom” reverberates with

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<sup>60</sup> This concession, however, appears to be a reluctant one. Pyne’s paper is filled with “guilt by association” assertions that are both unreasonable and unjustifiable. Pyne, for example, regularly associates southern culture generally with dispensationalism on the one hand, while completely ignoring the British roots of dispensationalism on the other. In one egregious case he quotes an unsigned editorial which advocated restricting suffrage to white males (including the inflammatory statement, “Fred Douglass, a negro who rejoiced in the possession of a white wife”) as an example of the “influences” behind dispensationalism. Pyne, “The New Man in an Immoral Society: Expectations Between the Times,” 7. In another place he has an extended quote from L. Nelson Bell who argues that it is “inappropriate for believers to focus on issues like race relations and economic justice.” Ibid. Bell also opined that the “elimination of racial distinctions would result in confusion in the South” and that labor leaders who advocated such things were communists. Ibid., 8. Yet this is hardly fair. By Pyne’s own admission “Bell was not a dispensationalist. Indeed, he was on the committee that examined the dispensationalism of Lewis S. Chafer and considered it to be outside the church’s standards.” Ibid. Quoting an unknown author in one case and an opponent of dispensationalism in another to illustrate the “influence” of southern culture upon dispensationalism is a leap in logic to say the least. Pyne’s justification for this tenuous association is that “all the premillennialists within that denomination apparently numbered themselves among the conservatives.” Ibid., 9. Yet in this case it appears that “conservatives” were those not considered “liberal.” Liberals “did not necessarily hold to verbal inerrancy and they were generally open to the possibility that their belief in the virgin birth might be proven false.” Ibid., 8. One might as well say that dispensationalists agree with covenant theologians about inerrancy and the virgin birth, therefore their theology is the same.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 10. The cultural shift of which Pyne speaks includes a conscious shift towards post-modernity. “We (the younger generation of dispensationalists) are more self-consciously critical of our own assumptions and traditions, and we are more likely to take into account the contributions of those outside our tradition. ... Even the acceptance of an inaugurated eschatology may reflect more openness to the synthetic, ‘both/and’ pattern of contemporary thought as opposed to the ‘either/or’ of modernity and the fundamentalist controversies.” Ibid., 12.

<sup>62</sup> M. Daniel Carroll R., “Broadening Horizons, Redirecting Focus: A Response to Robert Pyne on Progressive Dispensationalism and Social Ethics,” in *Evangelical Theological Society Dispensational Study Group* (Santa Clara, CA: 1997), 5. “I would classify myself, I guess, among those who are called ‘progressive dispensationalists,’

ethical and socio-political repercussions. Indeed, it is the presence of Christ reigning currently over an inaugurated-kingdom that seems to be the basis for the alleged closing of the “theological loophole.”

Central to Bock’s understanding of the gospel is the announcement of Christ as king. He contends one of the “major burdens” of the Apostle Luke is “to show how the Davidic ruler comes to have such comprehensive authority over all humans.”<sup>63</sup> This authority is comprehensive in that it is not limited to merely personal relationships, but expands to social and political relationships as well. Blaising declares “Christ intends to redeem humankind socially as well as individually. *The social redemption of humanity begins in the church.*”<sup>64</sup> Thus the church is to exercise a radical role in society because “we are called first to conversion in ourselves, not just individually but socially and politically.”<sup>65</sup> External social ministry and the political work of the church go hand in hand as part of the call to Christ.<sup>66</sup> Thus Moore correctly concludes, “An evangelical exploration of the present/future kingship of Christ is by its very nature a consideration of political theory since the social and political element is interwoven with biblical Christology.”<sup>67</sup> In practical terms, this means “the church should

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yet I have not been very much involved in some of the internal debates going on with this theological tradition.”  
Ibid., 1.

<sup>63</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1-9:50*, ed. Moisés Silva, 2 vols., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 117.

<sup>64</sup> Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1993), 287.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>67</sup> Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 65.

exercise its responsibility along with worldly citizens in the legislation, execution, and adjudication of law.”<sup>68</sup>

### Separation of Church and State

One of the concerns immediately expressed in relation to political action by the church is an historical one. Past failures of states dominated by the church (both protestant and Roman Catholic) cast long shadows in any discussion of this sort. Noll, for example, notes with caution Abraham Kuyper’s “Kingdom activity” in the nineteenth century Netherlands.<sup>69</sup> The specter of a “kingly” role by the church is one acknowledged and rejected by advocates of an inaugurated-kingdom.

To guard against this establishmentarian error, advocates of an inaugurated-kingdom, somewhat surprisingly, attempt to draw dispensational distinctives.

Recognizing the dispensational difference between our present situation and that which will be established only at the coming of Christ keeps that activity evangelistic. The Head of the church, the King of all nations is yet to come in judgment. The church does not bear the sword over unbelief. That has been the error of some experiments of church and state in the past, and it springs from a misunderstanding of the dispensation in which we live.<sup>70</sup>

This approach is in agreement with Ladd who insists that the “mystery of the Kingdom” is that “it is here but not with irresistible power. ... [T]he Kingdom of God has come among men *and yet men can reject it.*”<sup>71</sup> He adds, “It is not the business of those who are called to the ministry of

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<sup>68</sup> Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 289.

<sup>69</sup> Mark A. Noll and others, *Adding Cross to Crown: The Political Significance of Christ’s Passion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 15.

<sup>70</sup> Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 290.

<sup>71</sup> Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, 56.

the Word to speak with authoritarian compulsion.”<sup>72</sup> While it is true that Christ will come with power at the consummation of the kingdom, Bock argues that this current form of the kingdom is marked by the cross, not the crown. Jesus’ activity in the present form of the kingdom is “marked by redemptive, saving activity,” not the “church’s exercise of power.” This truth “calls into question a theology of dominion for the current era of the church.”<sup>73</sup>

Moore agrees, adding,

Thus, the ‘already’ of the Kingdom is not defined by victorious evangelical political parties, but by periodic accomplishments punctuated with the sufferings of the people of God. Similarly, contra all forms of dominion theology, this view of Kingdom activity helps to maintain the evangelical commitment to separation of church and state and religious liberty.<sup>74</sup>

While one has no reason to doubt the sincerity of the proponents of this position, a closer examination of this argument reveals it to be a textbook example of incoherence. On the one hand the call of Christ is a call to political and social action,<sup>75</sup> while on the other Jesus’ activity in the present form of the kingdom is “marked by redemptive, saving activity,” not the “church’s exercise of power.”<sup>76</sup> It is asserted that an “evangelical exploration of the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>73</sup> Darrell L. Bock, “Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment,” *TTJ* 15, no. 1 (1994): 85. “The manifestation of dominion authority for saints is part of what is yet to come in the kingdom program. For the current era, the call is to be an example in the world through faithfulness, holiness, and a suffering demonstration of love .... The church is not to be characterized by a pursuit of power, but of service.” Ibid., 86.

<sup>74</sup> Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 77. “The developing Kingdom consensus on eschatology [emphasizes], with Hebrews 2, that the present stage of the Kingdom is defined by the ascent of the suffering Messiah to Golgotha, not by the descent of the new Jerusalem from the heavens.” Ibid., 76-77.

<sup>75</sup> Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 67.

<sup>76</sup> Bock, “Current Messianic Activity,” 85.

present/future kingship of Christ is by its very nature a consideration of political theory since the social and political element is interwoven with biblical Christology,”<sup>77</sup> but it is also asserted that the church is not defined by “evangelical political parties.”<sup>78</sup> What is intended by these apparently contradictory statements is the idea that the church should be working towards justice<sup>79</sup> through political means while maintaining religious liberty.<sup>80</sup> As Pyne describes it, “Further, many politically active Christians desire not just to be represented, but to take over. I would prefer to see the church as the prophet outside the wall than to see us as the emperor’s mistress.”<sup>81</sup>

### Evaluation of Inaugurated-Kingdom Political Action

#### Understanding the Argument

It is often difficult to understand the arguments of inaugurated-kingdom proponents due to inadequately-stated assumptions and only cursory explanations justifying their proposals. Further complicating matters is the fact that much of what they state could be said with equal fervor by those that do not hold to an “already/not yet” understanding of the kingdom. Therefore, one must determine what is genuinely “new” in this understanding of socio-political action and what is merely a restatement of what has long been held by others.

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<sup>77</sup> Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 65.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>79</sup> The justice referred to is primarily racial and economic (by which is meant relief to the poor). One cannot help but observe that the goals explicitly stated, while admirable, are more often associated with the religious left than the religious right. This is not meant to imply that they are not worthy goals to be pursued (yet see Matt 26:11!). Nevertheless the silence regarding equally legitimate concerns from the other end of the political spectrum is odd.

<sup>80</sup> This proposition is made, by the way, without so much as a single biblical referent as justification. The American political ideal is assumed but never defended or even challenged.

<sup>81</sup> Pyne, “The New Man in an Immoral Society: Expectations Between the Times,” 15.

Pyne, for example, concedes that the efforts of the church will not bring about a utopian society, any more than evangelistic efforts will bring about the salvation of the world. Nevertheless, he does think “we can bring a taste of the kingdom into human experience.”<sup>82</sup> He cites the poverty in India as a case study. He harbors no illusions about transforming that society because the “needs are simply too great.” Still, a local school with an orphanage and medical clinic are cited as examples of “a taste of the kingdom of God.”<sup>83</sup>

If this is what is meant by social reform it is difficult to see any difference between this and mission work that has gone on for quite some time. One wonders about what is “new” or even “political” about this. Schools, medical clinics, seminaries, orphanages, and the like are common expressions of the church in general. It is Pyne’s understanding of such established mission applications that is puzzling. In fact, his explanation is just another example of the widespread incoherence of the “emerging consensus” in general. On the one hand, Pyne, following Niebuhr’s Christian realism, affirms “social progress takes place not through the encouragement of virtue, but through the restraint of evil.”<sup>84</sup> It is assumed that a more just society is envisioned even though the phrase “social progress” is left undefined. On the other hand, the “taste of the kingdom” described above is spreading as “similar structures are being erected in the local communities as careful observers follow their example.”<sup>85</sup> Isn’t this the encouragement of virtue in action? The church is to model racial reconciliation for the world.<sup>86</sup> What is this if not the encouragement of virtue?

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Pyne admits that sin is a reality in the believer's life so that "people will not simply do the right thing once they have been converted."<sup>87</sup> Nevertheless, "we have reason to believe that Christians under the influence of the Holy Spirit should not need the same external threat of power that is so necessary in human politics. We should be able to lead the way in reconciliation."<sup>88</sup> The question begs to be asked, "Who is it we should be leading?" Is it the unredeemed world? Is it the church in general? If the latter, then how are we transforming current political structures?

Perhaps the greater question is what is the theological loophole that has been closed and what is it in an "already/not yet" understanding that closes it? Additionally, what aspects of the emerging evangelical consensus do Christians hold generally, and what is it that is being proposed as a correction?

Moore provides another example of apparently contradictory statements. He rejects the theonomic movement, stating that the "Kingdom of God in this era is manifested in the regenerate church, not in any secular government."<sup>89</sup> Therefore, the church

witnesses to the whole counsel of God and to the justice of the Kingdom, through the internal discipline of the Body and through the external witness to the state and the societal structures. In doing so, it can maintain a tempered engagement in sociopolitical concerns as indeed matters of 'spiritual', and thus churchly, import.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 165-65.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 167-68. Moore describes, in practical terms, what this internal discipline should look like. "The church does not claim from the Old Testament theocracy the right to stone child molesters to death. The Body does claim a mandate as the 'workshop of Kingdom righteousness' to reflect justice and peace in the midst of the congregation. Therefore the congregation is exercising a concern for social (and even political) righteousness when they expel the unrepentant child molester from the membership of the church. This is hardly a novel concept." Ibid., 168. One must agree with Moore that this is not a novel concept.

Thus, as the church “deals internally with matters of justice, it witnesses to the political powers-that-be of the kind of Kingdom righteousness the gospel demands, not only of individuals but also of communities.”<sup>91</sup> *Yet if all that is meant by “political action” is for the church to love one another as Christ commands and exercise internal discipline, one fails to see why an inaugurated-kingdom understanding is necessary.* At the same time, Moore condemns Presbyterian theologian Robert Lewis Dabney and other southern nineteenth-century theologians for their opposition to political action by the church with regards to slavery. This refusal to get involved in a political issue was itself “a political act, by propping up the status quo.”<sup>92</sup> Again, one wonders exactly what political action is called for that requires an inaugurated-kingdom understanding. It appears that he is calling for a renewed and invigorated denominational structure that would then issue policy statements, although that may be more than he intends.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, he is clear that the church is to vigorously engage the social and political structures as an “initial form of the coming global monarchy,” which “includes electoral politics.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 168-69.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>93</sup> He condemns the trans-denominationalism of the fundamentalist movement, para-church organizations, the “ecclesiological fuzziness” of dispensationalism (Lewis Sperry Chafer in particular), and an “individualistic model” of Christian experience. Ibid., 164-173. Instead, “the only structure which can cultivate the revelational atmosphere in which biblically-ordered families can thrive is the church. ... Such a view resonates with a Protestant commitment to a New Testament teaching basing the community of the church on a prior commitment to prophetic/apostolic authority.” Ibid., 170-71.

<sup>94</sup> Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 173.



### William Wilberforce's Political Theory

One means of sorting through the “old” and the “new” is to review the best example<sup>95</sup> of social-political action that does not subscribe to an inaugurated-kingdom. By all accounts, one of the shining examples of socio-political engagement by a Christian is the abolition struggle of William Wilberforce (1759-1833).<sup>96</sup> Soon after being elected a member of Parliament in 1780, he was converted and joined the strict Clapham Sect—a group devoted to the promotion of evangelical ideals in the public square. His Christian convictions compelled him to use his considerable oratorical powers in opposition to the slave trade. In 1807, due largely to his untiring efforts, the emancipation of all English slaves was achieved. Shortly after this crowning achievement, Wilberforce died. His work was not merely political however. He helped found the Church Missionary Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society. He contributed to the charities of Hannah More which assisted the poor and provided schools and adult educational opportunities, among many other good works.<sup>97</sup> One of his most lasting legacies (outside the abolition of slavery in England) is his book *Practical view of the prevailing religious system of professed Christians, in the higher and middle classes in this country, contrasted with real Christianity*.<sup>98</sup> This book helped spark the second Great Awakening and its influence was felt

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<sup>95</sup> Some seem to think it more appropriate to dredge up the worst examples that can be found in order to show the magnitude of the problem. In evaluating an argument, however, it is better to find the best example since this will show the true impact of a theological system and not merely highlight its misuse.

<sup>96</sup> This brief account of Wilberforce's life is taken from Lavinia Cohn-Sherbok, *Who's Who in Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 313.

<sup>97</sup> For more a more complete discussion of the life of William Wilberforce see Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (San Francisco: Harper, 2007).

<sup>98</sup> This book was originally published in 1797. For an edited and updated version see William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity*, ed. Kevin Charles Belmonte (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996).

throughout Europe and the United States.<sup>99</sup> While the subject of *A Practical View* is an examination of true Christianity as opposed to mere religion, the last chapter is a discussion of the political impact of true Christianity upon a society.

Unlike the current evangelical consensus, Wilberforce held to a strictly spiritual form of the kingdom that found its manifestation in heaven.<sup>100</sup> He had no conception of a contemporary “sneak peak”<sup>101</sup> of the coming kingdom. Nevertheless, Wilberforce insists that “the state of Religion in a country at any given period ... immediately becomes a question of great *political* importance....”<sup>102</sup>

This assertion is based upon the reality that the “temporal well-being of political communities”<sup>103</sup> is influenced to a great degree by the “general standard or tone of morals”<sup>104</sup> that exist in that community. Wilberforce acknowledges that the morality of a given community may differ over time and across socio-economic situations. Still, this general tone regulates morality by inciting the populace to live up to that standard. The influence of this

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<sup>99</sup> Charles Colson, “Introduction,” in *A Practical View of Christianity*, ed. Kevin Charles Belmonte (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), xxv.

<sup>100</sup> “The Christian is then reminded at every turn, that his Master’s kingdom is not of this world. When all on earth wears a black and threatening aspect, he looks up to heaven for consolation; he learns practically to consider himself a pilgrim and a stranger.” Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity*, 192-93.

<sup>101</sup> Bock, “The Reign of the Lord Christ,” 65.

<sup>102</sup> Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity*, 190.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 191. Wilberforce assumes that the morality of a society greatly influences the general welfare of a community. This is “a fact which depends on such obvious and undeniable principles, and which is so forcibly inculcated by the history of all ages, that there can be no necessity for entering into a formal proof of its truth.” Ibid., 190.

general moral standard also exerts pressure in the opposite direction, however, often punishing those who rise above it.<sup>105</sup>

Knowing that much good could come to society even through the general morality of a false religion, Wilberforce insisted that, without the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, the only means for enforcing these moral codes is governmental sanctions.<sup>106</sup> Therefore, it will not do to establish the “moral or practical precepts of Christianity, ... [without] laying the grand foundation, of a sinner’s acceptance with God, or point out how the practical precepts of Christianity grow out of her peculiar doctrines, and are inseparably connected with them.”<sup>107</sup> Indeed, it is a “fatal habit” to consider “Christian morals as distinct from Christian doctrines.”<sup>108</sup> Nor will it do to establish a state church for the promotion of moral behavior. “A system, if not supported by a real persuasion of its truth, will fall to the ground.”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid. This principle holds true regardless of the religion or irreligion of the populace. “Christians, Jews, Turks, Infidels, and Heretics, persons of ten thousand different sorts of passions and opinions, being members at the same time of the same community, and all conscious that they will be examined by this same standard, will regulate their conduct accordingly, and, with no great difference, will all adjust themselves to the required measure.” Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> “But the superior excellence of Christianity in this respect must be acknowledged, both in the superiority of her moral code, and in the powerful motives and efficacious means which she furnishes for enabling us to practice it; and in the tendency of her doctrines to provide for the observance of her precepts, by producing tempers of mind which correspond with them.” Ibid., 205.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 210. This was Wilberforce’s main complaint in the book, namely that, while organized religion flourished, true religion was vanishing. “Thus it not infrequently happens, that in a more advanced state of society, a religious establishment must be indebted for its support to that very Religion which in earlier times it fostered and protected; as the weakness of some aged mother is sustained, and her existence lengthened, by the tender assiduities of the child whom she had reared in the helplessness of infancy. So in the present instance, unless there be reinfused into the mass of our society, something of that principle, which animated our ecclesiastical system in its earlier days, it is vain for us to hope that the establishment will very long continue; for the anomaly will not much longer be borne, of an establishment, the actual principles of the bulk of whose members, and even teachers, are so extremely different from those which it professes.” Ibid.

Instead, Wilberforce held that the key to political action was the evangelism of the populace. He held that the problem, while having great political importance, was not so much political as it was moral.<sup>110</sup> Thus, if the moral climate of the country improved, so would the political and economic situation of that country. “If indeed through the blessing of Providence, a principle of true Religion should in any considerable degree gain ground, there is no estimating the effects on public morals, and the consequent influence on our political welfare.”<sup>111</sup>

The increase of true believers on society has four results, according to Wilberforce, all of them having political consequences. First, as stated above, there is the general raising of the moral tone of society. This by itself tends to elevate the behavior of even those who do not believe. Second, civil strife would be considerably lessened.<sup>112</sup> Third, the economic conflict between rich and poor would be eased by the church’s teaching to both.<sup>113</sup> Fourth, Christians

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>112</sup> “Following peace also with all men, and looking upon them as members of the same family, entitled not only to the debts of justice, but to the less definite and more liberal claims of fraternal kindness, he would naturally be respected and beloved by others, and be in himself free from the annoyance of those bad passions by which those who are actuated by worldly principles are so commonly corroded. If any country were indeed filled with men, each thus diligently discharging the duties of his own station without breaking in upon the rights of others, but on the contrary endeavouring, so far as he might be able, to forward their views and promote their happiness, all would be active and harmonious in the goodly frame of the human race. There would be no jarrings, no discord.” Ibid., 203.

<sup>113</sup> “In whatever class or order of society Christianity prevails, he sets herself to rectify the particular faults, or if we would speak more distinctly, to counteract the particular mode of selfishness, to which that class is liable. Affluence she teaches to be liberal and beneficent; authority, to bear its faculties with meekness, and to consider the various cares and obligations belonging to its elevated station as being conditions on which that station is conferred. Thus, softening the glare of wealth, and moderating the insolence of power, she renders the inequalities of the social state less galling to the lower orders, who also she instructs, in their turn, to be diligent, humble, patient: reminding them that their more lowly path has been allotted to them by the hand of God: that it

would, by the nature of civil society, be active in civil affairs, just as they are in other endeavors of life.<sup>114</sup> Christians are to perform their duties, regardless of their calling, with faithfulness and skill as befits their Christian profession.<sup>115</sup>

One might be tempted to dismiss Wilberforce's political ideals as utopian and unrealistic if it were not for the enormous political change that he helped engineer. Yet to describe Wilberforce as "utopian" would be a gross misreading of his argument. Ever the realist, he acknowledged that Christianity has often been, and will most likely be again, persecuted.<sup>116</sup> Nevertheless, he contended that even persecution improves the state of society since "[p]ersecution generally tends to quicken the vigour and extend the prevalence of the opinions which she would eradicate. ... Christianity especially has always thriven under persecution."<sup>117</sup>

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is their part faithfully to discharge its duties and contentedly to bear its inconveniences: that the present state of things is very short..." Ibid., 208-09.

<sup>114</sup> "Nor is it only by their personal conduct, though this mode will always be the most efficacious, that men of authority and influence may promote the cause of good morals. Let them in their several stations encourage virtue and discountenance vice in others. Let them enforce the laws by which the wisdom of our forefathers has guarded against the grosser infractions of morals and congratulate themselves, that in a leading situation on the bench of justice there is placed a man who, to his honour be it spoken, is well disposed to assist their efforts. Let them favour and take part in any plans which may be formed for the advancement of morality." Ibid., 215.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>116</sup> His description of the public ridicule of Christianity sounds alarmingly familiar! "[T]he time is fast approaching, when Christianity will be almost as openly disavowed in the language, as in fact it is already supposed to have disappeared from the conduct of men; when infidelity will be held to be the necessary appendage of a man of fashion, and *to believe* will be deemed the indication of a feeble mind and a contracted understanding." Ibid., 195-96.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 192.

It is interesting to note the justification Wilberforce uses in regard to the civil and political duties of Christians. It is not the reality of a kingdom now but fealty to Christ in heaven that incites participation in secular affairs. In fact, the true believer maintains a “comparative indifference to the things of this world.”<sup>118</sup> Yet this “comparative indifference” to the world should not move the believer to inaction. Instead, the motivating principle of a believer is to “please God in all his thoughts, and words, and actions.”<sup>119</sup>

### **Things Old**

What is noteworthy about Wilberforce’s political understanding is how similar it appears to that of inaugurated-kingdom proponents. It recognizes that applied Christianity is a matter of great political importance, is evangelistic in nature, and disavows the establishment of a state church. It acknowledges the reality of persecution, finds temporal value in it, and yet insists that believers be involved in the political process.

These propositions are obviously nothing new (Wilberforce wrote them in 1797!) nor have they been recently rediscovered. In fact, it is the emphasis upon personal evangelism (to the exclusion of wider political matters) that is the main focus of critics of traditional dispensationalism! While it is no doubt true that North American premillennialism could have done a better job being salt and light, one searches in vain for a theological loophole!

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<sup>118</sup> “On the first promulgation of Christianity, it is true, some of her early converts seem to have been in danger of so far mistaking the principles of the new Religion, as to imagine that in the future they were to be discharged from active attendance on their secular affairs. But the Apostle ... most pointedly guarded them against so gross an error, and expressly and repeatedly enjoined them to perform the particular duties of their several stations with increased alacrity and fidelity, that they might thereby do credit to their Christian profession. This he did, at the same time that he prescribed to them that predominant love of God and of Christ, that heavenly-mindedness, that comparative indifference to the things of this world, that earnest endeavour after growth in grace, and perfection in holiness, which have already been stated as the essential characteristics of real Christianity. *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

Wilberforce's position is, in fact, central to a traditional dispensational understanding of history. One of the brightest (and unfortunately most neglected) lights of traditional dispensationalism was Alva McClain (1888-1968), founder and first president of Grace Theological Seminary and Grace College. He maintained that the "Kingdom of God"<sup>120</sup> is a spiritual kingdom, regardless of the form in which it is manifest.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, "a spiritual kingdom ... can manifest itself and produce tangible effects in a physical world; or to be more precise, in the world of sense experience."<sup>122</sup> Indeed, "it is nothing new to find a spiritual cause producing tangible effects in the area of sense experience."<sup>123</sup> Although McClain was defending the concept of a future physical (as opposed to purely spiritual) kingdom in these comments, he did not consider it unusual to assume that the tangible benefits of God's spiritual people

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<sup>120</sup> "[T]he 'Kingdom of God' may be defined broadly as the rule of God of His creation." Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God as set forth in the Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1950), 19.

<sup>121</sup> "In one sense it would not be wholly wrong to speak of two kingdoms revealed in the Bible. But we must at the same time guard carefully against the notion that these two kingdoms are absolutely distinct, one from the other. There is value and instruction in thinking of them as *two aspects* or phases of the one rule of our sovereign God. In seeking for terms which might best designate these two things, I can find nothing better than the adjectives 'universal' and mediatorial.' These are not exactly commensurate terms, of course, but describe different qualities; the first referring to the *extent* of the rule, the latter to the *method* of rule." *Ibid.*, 21. Thus, according to McClain, the "universal" kingdom is God's rule over all things at all times. The "mediatorial" kingdom is the kingdom established in the OT, offered by Christ in the Gospels, offered again by the apostles in Acts, and which will one day be re-established at the Parousia.

<sup>122</sup> McClain, *Greatness of the Kingdom*, 520. It is ironic how the arguments for political action in the present have shifted since the time of McClain. He feels the need to defend the reality of the coming kingdom from those who insist that the kingdom is purely spiritual in nature. "But strangely enough, some of the very men who are so scornful of the alleged 'materialism' of a millennial kingdom, are the most insistent that the Church today must make effective in society what they call the social and moral ideals of the present kingdom of God." *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 521.

should be felt in the here and now. In fact, it is the optimism of premillennialism that should prompt God's people to action in the present.

The premillennial philosophy of history ... rightly apprehended ... has practical effects. It says that life here and now, in spite of the tragedy of sin, is nevertheless something worthwhile; and therefore all efforts to make it better are also worthwhile. All the true values of human life will be preserved and carried over into the coming kingdom; nothing worthwhile will be lost.<sup>124</sup>

Benware, another dispensationalist, agrees, suggesting that a focus on the world to come is the essential element in leading a consistent Christian life in the present. He advocates a “two world view” that he insists “has been the thinking of serious Christians over the centuries.”<sup>125</sup> He maintains that those who focus on the world to come will live a life of greater authenticity and greater consistency now.<sup>126</sup> While not explicitly mentioned, one would assume that this would include the benefits detailed by Wilberforce. Stallard, a traditional dispensationalist, is more explicit, reflecting Wilberforce's model exactly.

Now that I am a Christian, I feel ... the deep sense of moral obligation to change the world I live in the best I can. Uppermost in my mind is the spreading of the Good News that Jesus is alive and that forgiveness of sins is available by the grace of God through faith in His finished work on the Cross for the world. Beyond that, I believe that my life should reflect the character of God while I work in this world “between the times” awaiting the return of Christ.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 531.

<sup>125</sup> Paul Benware, “Biblical Prophecy: An Essential Element in Living a Genuine and Useful Christian Life,” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 11, no. 32 (2007): 6.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Mike Stallard, “An Essentialist Response to Robert A. Pyne's “The New Man in an Immoral Society: Expectations Between the Times,”” in *Evangelical Theological Society Dispensational Study Group* (Santa Clara, CA: 1997), 1.



The genius of Wilberforce's argument is that it provides no theological barrier for its adoption by either premillennial, amillennial, or postmillennial theologies. This is because it is primarily Christological and pneumatological—not eschatological—in nature. It depends upon the transformation of the individual, not the outworking of a kingdom. As usual, C. S. Lewis is most articulate in defense of this view.

Hope is one of the Theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth “thrown in”: aim at earth and you will get neither.<sup>128</sup>

### **Things New**

Inaugurated-kingdom proponents subscribe to much of Wilberforce's political philosophy. Nevertheless, there are significant differences that should be noted.

First, the basis for political significance is different. Wilberforce contends that it is the believers' general obedience to Christ that motives them to fulfill whatever calling is theirs. He assumes that God will place believers in all stations of society and that general faithfulness to him will ensure the practical effect of a more just community. In contrast, inaugurated-kingdom proponents insist that the basis for political action is the reality of a present kingdom.

It should be noted that they are not always clear at this point. On the one hand, Blaising seems to be very close Wilberforce.

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<sup>128</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev. and enlarged ed. (New York: Collier, 1952), 104.

But from what base does the church speak to national justice and peace? From a progressive dispensational perspective, that base should be the future eschatological kingdom, ... and the manifestation of kingdom righteousness in the life of the church itself. The church must participate from a revelational base in which it seeks justice within its own society and testifies from that base in its work for justice in the society at large.<sup>129</sup>

Thus he seems to be saying that it is hope for the future that causes the church to model a righteousness that can call for justice. Upon closer examination, however, Blaising is not merely calling for heavenly mindedness and the raising of the moral tone of society by the evangelism of the populace. This sort of “individualized Christianity” is rejected. Instead, it is the church as community that is the manifestation of kingdom righteousness.<sup>130</sup> Again, this manifestation is not merely a good moral example. There is a “dispensational connection with the kingdom” that “gives the church a basis for an evangelistic participation in the political and social affairs of this world.”<sup>131</sup> This “evangelistic participation” is defined as the church (not as individual believers, but as a community) working for “just laws as a testimony to the justice which she pursues within herself under the power of her present and future Lord.”<sup>132</sup> In other words, it appears that Blaising is stating that the basis for evangelical engagement by the church community is mandated by the church’s present status as inaugurated-kingdom. If this is a correct understanding of his argument, Moore agrees and is (thankfully) clearer in his explanation.

[T]he emerging evangelical eschatological consensus can call the church away from cultural withdrawal precisely because the throne of David is occupied and active even

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<sup>129</sup> Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 289.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 289-90.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

now. ... Because an already exalted Davidic King rules the Christian community, evangelical theology has the mandate to scrutinize the features of current political relationships against the characteristics of the now-ruling messianic King....<sup>133</sup>

*Thus it is the presence of the kingdom, not a general obedience to Christ, which describes the political action obligation of the church.*

Second, the emerging evangelical consensus calls for more overt political action by the church. Wilberforce argued that consistent Christian living would have socio-political action flowing naturally from it. Inaugurated-kingdom proponents view this as social disengagement.<sup>134</sup> Instead, the church is to actively “condemn political tyranny and domestic abuse of power.” The church does not have “the option of inaction against judicial abuses” because she is ruled by the Davidic king who judges with “fairness and equity.”<sup>135</sup>

Third, progressive dispensationalists in particular are calling for a reevaluation of traditional dispensationalism’s use of the Mosaic Law.<sup>136</sup> This seems to be a logically necessary conclusion that flows from their understanding of the kingdom. If there is a shared identity between the “already” form of the kingdom and the “not yet” form, and if the same king is ruling this one kingdom, then it follows that the constitution of the kingdom government must be the same.

Unfortunately, the emerging evangelical consensus betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of government, a myopic view of the church, an ultimately

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<sup>133</sup> Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 69-70.

<sup>134</sup> Pyne, “The New Man in an Immoral Society: Expectations Between the Times,” 10.

<sup>135</sup> Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 70.

<sup>136</sup> Carroll R., “Broadening Horizons, Redirecting Focus: A Response to Robert Pyne on Progressive Dispensationalism and Social Ethics,” 7.

indefensible position on the essence of justice, an inconsistent understanding of the kingdom, and an almost total lack of biblical support. Each of these concerns will be discussed in turn.

### The Nature of Law

By God's design, the essence of government has included the exercise of force. When God established human government, the command regarded the application of force (with extreme prejudice) to one who had taken the life of another (Gen 9:6). The rationale for this action was entirely theological. An attack upon another person was, by extension, an attack upon God himself and therefore warranted the death penalty. The Apostle Paul also describes the nature of government with an appeal to the authority of God and the application of force. Rulers are appointed (τεταγμένοι) by God (Rom 13:1-2). Those who do wrong are subject to terror (φόβος) because the ruler is God's servant (θεοῦ διάκονός) and an avenger of wrath (ἔκδικος εἰς ὀργήν) for those who do wrong (Rom 13:3-4). This wrath includes capital punishment since he does not bear (φορεῖ) the sword (μάχαιραν) for no purpose (εἰκῆ - Rom 13:4). Similarly Peter describes government as sent (πεμπομένοις) by God for the purpose of punishment (εἰς ἐκδίκησιν) of evildoers (κακοποιῶν) and the praise (ἔπαινον) of those who do what is right (1 Pet 2:14).<sup>137</sup> What is clear from these passages is that government was (and is) established by God for the purpose of encouraging and enforcing his justice, including the exercise of force. Indeed, if government fails to use force to bring God's vengeance on evildoers, it has been disobedient to its biblical mandate.

Since government, by its nature, is an exercise of force, any law enacted to compel a behavior is also an exercise of force. It will not do to encourage political action and institutional change on the one hand and then deny that this is an imposition of your will on

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<sup>137</sup> Both Paul and Peter include the obligation to reward those who do what is right in their description of government.

the other. If the present form of the kingdom is marked by redemptive activity not the “church’s exercise of power,” then it cannot by definition also be called to social and political reform.<sup>138</sup>

For example, suppose, for the purpose of promoting economic justice, some form of the year of jubilee was enacted into law through a peaceful, popular referendum. No force would be exercised in the adoption of the legislation. It would be a peaceful expression of the public will. Nevertheless, an exercise of force would be necessary to enforce that law. Creditors would be required, one assumes against their will, to peaceably forgive legally acquired debts or be compelled to do so by the threat of governmental force. Thus, the ones forgiving the debt have had another’s morality forced upon them. Of course, this is not necessarily bad. *Whenever a law is enacted, by its nature it imposes the morality of some members of society over the rest and limits freedom of action by compelling a different action.* The law requiring motorists to drive on the right side of the road, for example, limits their freedom to drive on the left. Such is the nature of law. God uses the restrictive nature of law to promote a more moral and just society generally, or perhaps just safer roadways. Nevertheless, law is by nature an exercise of force.

Thus it is incoherent to simultaneously contend that the church is called to eschew the use of coercion to compel righteous behavior while at the same time maintaining that the mission of the church is to be an instrument of social and political reform. These two positions are mutually exclusive since legislation by definition is a use of force, regardless of the means of enacting the law. If it is “not the business of those who are called to the ministry of the

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<sup>138</sup> This argument does not apply to believers as individuals. Wilberforce assumed that believers would be called to all vocations. Instead, this argument is focusing on the church as a body politic. Acting as a community, as opposed to individuals, even social and economic pressure, such as boycotts, is an exercise of power.

Word to speak with authoritarian compulsion”<sup>139</sup> then it cannot be true that part of the call to Christ is the political work of the church.<sup>140</sup>

Inaugurated-kingdom proponents would counter that faith in Christ cannot be compelled but “justice in human relations” may be since this is “the proper concern of government.”<sup>141</sup> Neither of these assertions is questioned. Traditional dispensationalists stand in agreement with proponents of an inaugurated-kingdom when they insist that individual renewal through faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for moral transformation. They would also agree that said faith cannot be mandated or coerced, but must be a voluntary act of the will. Nor is it disputed that believers are called to be salt and light in the world so that men may see their good deeds and praise the Father in heaven (Matt 5:13-16).

What is questioned is whether or not *it is the calling of the church as organized communities to work towards a change in existing political and social structures in order that they may better reflect God’s justice*. The disagreement arises when it is asserted that it is a fundamental responsibility of the church to transform—without prior conversion—government in particular and the world in general. If conversion is required for the attainment of these goals, then the task of the church is to be about the business of making disciples and teaching them to obey what Christ has commanded (Matt 28:19-20). This is Wilberforce’s vision. If the church is tasked with the moral responsibility to redeem the world socially and politically then one needs only to convert enough people (or the powerful people) required to bring about institutional change. The power of the state may then be used to compel those who refuse to repent. Despite claims to the contrary, McClain’s warning is still worth heeding:

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<sup>139</sup> Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, 57.

<sup>140</sup> Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 289.

<sup>141</sup> Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 290.

[P]ractically, once the Church becomes the Kingdom in any realistic theological sense, it is impossible to draw any clear line between principles and their implementation through political and social devices. For the logical implications of a present ecclesiastical kingdom are unmistakable, and historically have always led in only one direction, i.e., political control of the state by the Church. The distances down this road traveled by various religious movements, and the forms of control which were developed, have been widely different. ... But the basic assumption is always the same: The Church in some sense in the Kingdom, and therefore has a divine right to rule; or it is the business of the Church to 'establish' fully the Kingdom of God among men. ... It forgets that just as in the regeneration of the individual soul only God can effect the miracle, even so the 'regeneration' of the world can only be wrought by the intrusion of regal power from on high.<sup>142</sup>

#### A Contemporary Occidental Perspective

Likewise, the call for the church to identify with the suffering Messiah on the one hand and the reign of the Lord Christ socially and politically on the other is irreconcilable. One can either suffer injustice passively, following the example of the Lord Jesus (1 Pet 2:21-23),<sup>143</sup> or one may engage the world system prophetically, following the example of John the Baptist (Matt 3:1-12) with a goal of bringing a "taste" of the inaugurated-kingdom into the present, but one may not do both. Again, these seem to be mutually exclusive ideas.

One of the major deficiencies with inaugurated-kingdom theology is that it seems limited to a contemporary occidental perspective. Its call to social and political reform only makes sense inside the worldview of a western democracy. This worldview seems to be assumed in much of the literature, although occasionally it is explicitly stated. For example, Blaising writes,

Over the past two millennia, the church has existed under a number of different national polities. Today, much of the church is found in participatory political structures, democracies of varying sorts. Recognizing that God superintends the national polities of humanity, and that existing political structures call for citizen participation, the church

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<sup>142</sup> McClain, *Greatness of the Kingdom*.

<sup>143</sup> One thinks of the persecuted church in the former Soviet bloc as an example.

should exercise its responsibility along with worldly citizens in the legislation, execution, and adjudication of law.<sup>144</sup>

There is much to agree with in his argument. It is true that God superintends the rising and fallings of governments and political systems. It is also true that much of the *contemporary* church exists in what may be formally labeled a participatory political structure, although the level of the actual participation allowed varies wildly. The individual's responsibility before God to be salt and light in this world by the exercise of his or her franchise is also willingly conceded.

Nevertheless, one must remember that western democracies are relatively new in the history of the church, let alone the world. If one includes the church from Pentecost to the present, one would be much harder pressed to use the phrase "*much* of the church is found in participatory political structures." A more conservative "*some*" might be more appropriate. The history of the church, particularly when one includes non-white Europeans and their decedents, is a story primarily of suffering and persecution. The freedom enjoyed by the contemporary western church is an anomaly when one considers the body of Christ as a whole.

That a *theologia crucis* has been acted out in the history of the church should be expected when one reads the NT. Jesus told his disciples that in this world they would have trouble (θλίψιν - John 16:33) because the world will hate them (μισούμεοι - Matt 10:22; Mark 13:13; Luke 21:17; μισεῖ - John 15:18-19) because of their identification with him. In fact, Peter explicitly equates suffering with the call (ἐκλήθητε) of the church, since the church is to follow the example of Christ. Support for the fact that the church should expect suffering, has

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<sup>144</sup> Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 289.



suffered, is suffering, and will suffer at the hands of a world that hates God and his people is almost unnecessary since the subject is so frequently and thoroughly discussed in the NT.

To their credit, those that hold to an inaugurated-kingdom readily acknowledge this. Moore insists that the developing kingdom consensus counters the concerns of those who fear an alliance between church and state by

emphasizing, with Hebrews 2, that the present stage of the Kingdom is defined by the ascent of the suffering Messiah to Golgotha, not by the descent of the new Jerusalem from the heavens. Thus, the “already” of the Kingdom is not defined by victorious evangelical political parties, but by periodic accomplishments punctuated with the suffering of the people of God.<sup>145</sup>

Yet this statement raises more questions than it answers.<sup>146</sup> How does suffering by the church bring about social and political redemption? This question is not to imply that suffering by the church is without meaning or is not useful in the plan of God. It is merely to point out that it is difficult to understand biblically, politically, or historically how suffering evokes political

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<sup>145</sup> Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 76-77.

<sup>146</sup> Moore appeals to Gaffin’s description for clarification, but it is equally confusing. “Looking in one direction, we must agree that New Testament eschatology is most assuredly an eschatology of victory, and of victory presently being realized. But, any outlook that fails to see that for the church, between the resurrection and return of Christ and *until* that return, the eschatology of victory is an eschatology of suffering, any outlook that otherwise tends to remove the dimension of suffering from the present *triumph* of the church, distorts the gospel and confuses the (apostolic) mission of the church in the world. The church does indeed carry the eschatological victory of Jesus into the world, but only as it takes up the cross after him. Its glory, always veiled, is revealed in its suffering with him. Until Jesus comes, his resurrection glory in the church is a matter of strength made perfect in suffering. The “golden age” is the age of power perfected in weakness.” Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “The Usefulness of the Cross,” *WTJ* 41, no. 2 (1979): 245. Again, this raises more questions than it answers. How is the “eschatology of victory” an “eschatology of suffering?” How is that victory “presently being realized?” How does one define the present “triumph” of the church? If one understood these phrases in a purely spiritual way, or as another way of describing the gospel proclaimed by the church, one could make sense of this argument. But it appears that Gaffin includes “the realities of daily living and cultural involvement” in his understanding. *Ibid.*: 246.

change.<sup>147</sup> The fact that suffering promotes the gospel through the lived-out faith of persecuted believers is not questioned. What is questioned is what political influence—defined as institutional change—a persecuted minority may exert? If evangelical political parties are not desired, certainly some evangelical participation in the current political party structure (however that is defined in whatever country is in view) is required. Otherwise how is the political process to be engaged? What is meant by “periodic accomplishment” if not political or social accomplishment? If it is not political accomplishment, what type of accomplishment is it that brings about social and political redemption?

Perhaps a more fundamental question is how social and political redemption *could be part of the call of Christ to the church when such political influence is oftentimes impossible?* In what way is the persecuted church in China, Sudan, or Iran to fulfill this mandate? What of the church that dwelt on earth prior to the advent of representative democracies? How was the church to influence the king if the ecclesiastical structures so often condemned were not appropriate responses?

In the end, one wonders if the inaugurated-kingdom proponents have answers to these questions or have even considered them. Any mandate Christ places upon the church must, by definition, be capable of being obeyed, regardless of the cultural and political environment. A call to political action does not meet that criterion.

### An Incomplete Understanding of Justice

One of the more puzzling aspects of inaugurated-kingdom proponents is their incomplete application of God’s justice. It seems that their goals are limited to a partial application of God’s righteousness while rejecting a wholesale implementation of it. Nearly all

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<sup>147</sup> Rebellions incited by extended suffering are an historical reality that is easily shown. The overthrow of Nikolai Ceausescu in Romania is just one recent example. Nevertheless, it was active political resistance brought about by suffering, not passive suffering itself that brought about the change in government.

the discussions for socio-political action based on an “already” understanding of the kingdom are limited to economic justice and race relations.<sup>148</sup> Few would deny the importance of these issues, nor the fact that they have often gone neglected when the church, particularly the white church, has been politically involved. Pyne correctly observes:

Since white evangelicals have mobilized their power and influence through groups like the Moral Majority, Focus on the Family, and the Christian Coalition, we have become very involved in both national and local politics. Unfortunately, that involvement has not always been distinctively Christian, for the political aims of white evangelicals are usually indistinguishable from those of the non-Christian Republicans who share their neighborhoods. Predominately black churches can easily make the same mistake, and in both cases we have lost our biblical witness.<sup>149</sup>

This is well said. Nevertheless, few would argue that God’s justice is limited to the topics of economic justice and race relations either. While some important topics have been (largely) ignored, others have been stressed. The special-interest groups mentioned above have been particularly active with other concerns. The most notable issue has been the protection of unborn life, but others, such as pornography, gambling, and religious freedom, to name a few,

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<sup>148</sup> One interesting exception to this overwhelming trend is Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*. While their main emphasis is economic justice, their treatment of ethics extends beyond this to include the death penalty, bioethics, just war theory, and gender roles among others. Stassen and Gushee maintain that the ethics of the kingdom are found almost exclusively in the Sermon on the Mount. In arguing for this position, they reveal deeply imbedded Marcionite tendencies, regularly pitting NT revelation against the OT. This book is also filled with unusual readings of otherwise clear texts and is littered with straw-man arguments. While they claim a deontological approach to ethics, they inevitably appeal to the practical consequences of such actions, moving to a teleological approach instead. In at least one instance they get their facts completely wrong. They contend “nowhere in the Old Testament do we see an actual case where what seems like prescriptions of the death penalty for various offenses were carried out by an Israelite criminal law system.” *Ibid.*, 202. Yet Numbers 15:32-35 is clearly such an instance. In the end, this book is unworthy to be treated as serious biblical scholarship.

<sup>149</sup> Pyne, “The New Man in an Immoral Society: Expectations Between the Times,” 15. This paragraph is yet another example of incoherence. While the church should not be forming evangelical political parties but at the same time should be actively involved in socio-political change, these groups, which appear to be following this pattern, are singled out as bad examples of political action by the church. Pyne seems difficult to please.

have also been prominent. This being said, social engagement does not have to be an either/or proposition. Single-issue advocacy is always dangerous in its temptation to pull the believer out of balance.

Yet what of other areas of socio-political concern? Should the church be advocating a toughening of divorce laws, for example? This is most certainly a matter of justice, particularly when infidelity is involved. This raises another issue: what of adultery? Should the church lobby for current adultery laws to be enforced and the implementation of stricter sanctions against those found guilty? If not, then why not? Anyone who has suffered through divorce as a result of infidelity will testify to the severe emotional and economic impact of such sin. Again, should the church urge upon society that homosexuality be outlawed and punished? Again, if not, then why not? What of drunkenness, both public and private? Illicit drug use is illegal even in one's residence. Why should drunkenness be treated differently? A blood/alcohol limit of .08%, for example, could be established and enforced. The economic and social impact of alcoholism is well known. Why is this never mentioned as a legitimate area for socio-political action by the church?

God proscribes all of these behaviors (and many others) in his Word. They have definable and measurable social and economic impact on the community as a whole. They are areas in which specific activity could be legislated. One would think that they would be part of an overall program of legislative concern by a politically active church. Instead, these issues are never mentioned. The reason for this is unknown, although one might suspect that part of the answer is the political unpopularity of such positions.

The fact is there are no guidelines for choosing which areas of God's righteousness are to be legislated and which are not. Ultimately, one has no basis for picking one issue over another except for political expediency. Socio-political justice advocated by the church must end in legislation in order to be effective. A "taste of the kingdom" is the goal. Yet, how is one

to determine which aspect of kingdom justice is to be advocated? In the end there is no answer to this question. God's righteousness is not a matter of personal taste. It comes as a package that is indivisible. This understanding of the law as an indivisible unity will be discussed in detail below.

### An Inconsistent Understanding of the Kingdom

An "already/not yet" view of the kingdom, particularly as understood by progressive dispensationalists, assumes an essential unity between the inaugurated form and the consummated form of that kingdom.<sup>150</sup> One of the hallmarks of progressive dispensationalism is its insistence that Christ is partially fulfilling the Davidic Covenant in that he is ruling from the throne of David in this present age. Bock contends

the Davidic throne and the heavenly throne of Jesus at the right hand of the Father are one and the same, but there are two stages to the rule of that throne, so that the earthly, national character of OT promises is maintained, even though their scope is broadened in the NT to include universal, salvific blessings bestowed by the messianic king through the Holy Spirit.<sup>151</sup>

At first blush, the progressive's view of the kingdom appears to be shared with amillennialism in that Christ occupies the throne now and that the nature of that throne is heavenly rather than earthly. Amillennialists contend that Christ is ruling from the throne of

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<sup>150</sup> While this section deals with the inaugurated-kingdom as described by progressive dispensationalists, the vast majority of contemporary believers share this view. It has been rightly called the "emerging consensus" (Ladd, *Presence of the Future*, 38-39 n 161). One reason for this is progressive dispensationalism's dependence upon covenant premillennialism for its hermeneutical assumptions. See, for example Hoch's dependence upon Ridderbos' redemptive-historical method in Carl B. Hoch Jr., "The New Man of Ephesians 2," in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 99

<sup>151</sup> Darrell L. Bock, "Evidence from Acts," in *The Coming Millennial Kingdom: A Case for Premillennial Interpretation*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997), 194.

David now in a spiritual sense. The kingdom had a historical component to it when the promised descendant of David was born, but the promised kingdom is, in reality, a spiritual one—namely the church—over which Christ rules as King.<sup>152</sup> But in actuality, progressives do not see the present reigning of Christ from David’s throne as anything but literal and physical.

Progressive dispensationalists do not believe that the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenants are being fulfilled today “in a spiritual sense.” The spiritual blessings being given today are blessings actually predicted by the new covenant. These blessings are given in a partial and inaugurated form, which looks forward to complete fulfillment at the return of Christ. ...The present inauguration and future fullness of new covenant fulfillment reveals another aspect in which the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants are being fulfilled today. All of these covenants will be fulfilled in a future dispensation consistent with the historical-grammatical sense of their promises. However, the progressive nature of the dispensations and the interconnection between the covenants is such that present blessings are a *partial*, not “allegorical,” fulfillment of those promises. They look forward to complete fulfillment at the return of Christ.<sup>153</sup>

In other words, progressives maintain the physical reality of David’s throne in heaven right now as well as the literal earthly throne of David in the Millennial Kingdom that is yet to come. The present form of the kingdom is, therefore, a partial physical fulfillment of the literal kingdom that is still future. What the church experiences now is a “sneak preview”<sup>154</sup> of the kingdom.

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<sup>152</sup> “Amillennialists hold that the promises made to Israel, David, and Abraham in the Old Testament are fulfilled by Jesus Christ and his church during this present age. The millennium is the period of time between the two advents of our Lord with the thousand years of Revelation 20 being symbolic of the entire interadvental age. At the first advent of Jesus Christ, Satan was bound by Christ’s victory over him at Calvary and the empty tomb. The effects of this victory continued because of the presence of the kingdom of God via the preaching of the gospel and as evidence by Jesus’ miracles. Through the spread of the gospel, Satan is no longer free to deceive the nations. Christ is presently reigning in heaven during the entire period between Christ’s first and second coming. At the end of the millennial age, Satan is released, a great apostasy breaks out, the general resurrection occurs, Jesus Christ returns in final judgment for all people, and he establishes a new heaven and earth.” Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 31-32.

<sup>153</sup> Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 53.

<sup>154</sup> Bock, “The Reign of the Lord Christ,” 53.

The kingdom is invisible in the sense that he does not rule over every person directly, but in those who share in the benefits he offers...Jesus rules from heaven, not earth, and thus the kingdom is invisible only in the sense that the rule does not originate visibly from earth....Thus there is continuity with the future kingdom in the present kingdom, though there is a distinction in the visibility of the King in the two phases of the reign and in the fact that the current kingdom lacks political, nationalistic elements.<sup>155</sup>

In other words, the kingdom should be viewed as similar in substance with the future Millennial Kingdom, minus the elements of universal rule and a visible political structure. Nevertheless, while these two elements are not currently realized, “the images show that elements of his current rule extend over all people.”<sup>156</sup>

While the progressive dispensationalists<sup>157</sup> see continuity between the current age and the coming kingdom, they fail to see the organic unity between the coming kingdom and the OT kingdom, and the enormous implications of such a connection. The prophet Amos describes the kingdom as a time when God will raise up (אָקִים) David’s fallen booth (דָּוִד אֶת־סֹכֶת) and build it (אָקִים) *as in the days of old* (עוֹלָם כִּיְמֵי) – Amos 9:11). Micah foresees a time when the

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Unlike the previous discussion of the inaugurated-kingdom, this section deals only with progressive dispensationalism. Unlike progressive dispensationalists, covenant premillennialists do not recognize the OT prophecies regarding Israel as applicable to the future kingdom due to their supersessionist theology. Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” 20. Unable to use the information provided by the OT prophets, Ladd is left speculating as to the final state of Israel. “While the New Testament clearly affirms the salvation of literal Israel, it does not give any details about the day of salvation. This, however, must be said: Israel’s salvation must occur in the same terms as Gentile salvation, by faith in Jesus as their crucified Messiah. As we have already pointed out, New Testament exegesis (Hebrews 8) makes it difficult to believe that the Old Testament prophecies about the ‘millennial temple’ will be fulfilled literally. They are fulfilled in the New Covenant established in the blood of Jesus. It may well be that Israel’s conversion will take place in connection with the millennium. It may be that in the millennium, for the first time in human history, we will witness a truly Christian nation. However, the New Testament does not give any details of Israel’s conversion and role in the millennium. So a nondispensational eschatology simply affirms the future salvation of Israel and remains open to God’s future as to the details.” Ibid., 28.

lame (הצלעה) and outcast (והנהלצה) become a strong nation (לגוי עצים) and the *former kingdom* (הממשלה הראשונה) will come to Jerusalem (Micah 4:7-8). God speaks to the land of Israel through Ezekiel and promises that all of the house of Israel--all of it--(כל בית ישראל בלה) will be returned. God will cause the land to be dwelt upon “as you were before” (כקדמותיכם – Ezek 36:10-11). In Ezekiel 37, the prophet sees a valley of dry bones. As he speaks the word of the LORD to them, the bones come together, flesh, tendons, muscle, and skin grow over them, breath goes into them and they stand up as a great army. While this passage finds its ultimate fulfillment in the future kingdom, there is a connection with the previous kingdom that should not be missed. This great army existed previously in that they are the slain (בהרוגים – Ezek 37:9) and that God will open their graves (מקברותיהם – Ezek 37:12). This is not a new nation, but one that existed previously. Immediately following this vision (Ezek 37:15-28), God commands the prophet to take up two sticks. One represents the southern kingdom of Judah and the other represents the northern kingdom of Ephraim (Israel). He is then to join the two sticks together so that they become one in his hand. This object lesson is used to illustrate God’s plan to bring the Israelites out of captivity and rejoin them into one nation (Ezek 37:22). Again, there is historical continuity between the future and the previous kingdom. God will not make something new but will instead undo his previous judgment (1 Kings 11:9-13). McCain summarizes this evidence well:

[T]he dynastic rights of the future King will constitute a restoration of certain historic rights which in their exercise have been temporarily interrupted but not extinguished. The rule of Messiah, while something wholly new and without parallel in all human history, will nevertheless display and maintain an unbroken historic connection with a kingdom which once existed in “days of old.”<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> McClain, *Greatness of the Kingdom*, 148.



More evidence of organic unity between the two kingdoms is found in the similarities between the OT temple system and the millennial temple system. The most extended description of the millennial temple and its functions is found in Ezekiel 40-48.<sup>159</sup> This passage is difficult by any standard<sup>160</sup> and is a matter of considerable controversy.<sup>161</sup> Still, this much seems clear: a straightforward reading of the text indicates a rebuilt temple complex complete

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<sup>159</sup> “Five possible explanations have been given. Some have explained the Ezekiel description as either the specifications for the temple of Solomon or plans for the later temple built after the return of the Babylonian captivity. The Scriptures, however, give detailed specifications for both temples (1 Kings 6:2-7:51; 2 Chron. 3:3-4:22; Ezra 6:3-4), and a comparison of these with the Ezekiel passage will demonstrate beyond question that the Ezekiel temple is different in its structure than either of the other temples built by Israel in the Old Testament. Some have offered a third view in an attempt to explain these variations by considering Ezekiel’s temple as an ideal which the returning pilgrims should have observed but did not. There is no Scripture, however, to substantiate that the returning captives knew anything of Ezekiel’s temple. Still another concept is that the picture of Ezekiel’s temple was intended to be a typical presentation only to be fulfilled by the church in the present age. This of course provides no exegesis of the passages and raises innumerable problems.

The fifth view, and the only one that provides any intelligent explanation of this portion of Scripture is that which assigns Ezekiel’s temple to the future millennial period. “Inasmuch as no fulfillment of this passage has ever taken place in history, if a literal interpretation of prophecy be followed, it would be most reasonable to assume that a future temple would be built in the millennium as the center of worship. ... Though it is true that the dimensions of the future temple would not fit the temple site as used historically in previous temples, a changed topography of Palestine in the millennium predicted in many passages would permit a rearrangement of the amount of space assigned to the temple. Actually, other views do not provide any legitimate explanation of the size of the temple either, except to deny literal fulfillment.” Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 309-10.

<sup>160</sup> “Dispensationalists have wrongly been put on the defensive regarding this passage. Nondispensationalists have as much difficulty harmonizing this passage with their theological schemes, for if they reject a literal interpretation of these chapters, they are unable to offer any real exegesis of the texts.” Jerry M. Hullinger, “The Problem of Animal Sacrifices in Ezekiel 40-48,” *BSac* 152, no. 607 (1995): 279 n1.

<sup>161</sup> For two dispensational yet opposing views of the millennial sacrifices see *Ibid*, Jerry M. Hullinger, “The Divine Presence, Uncleanness, and Ezekiel’s Millennial Sacrifices,” *BSac* 163, no. 652 (2006); John L. Mitchell, “The Question of Millennial Sacrifices: Part 1,” *BSac* 110, no. 439 (1953); John L. Mitchell, “The Question of Millennial Sacrifices: Part 2,” *BSac* 110, no. 440 (1953).

with reinstated offerings<sup>162</sup> and the feast of the Passover (45:21). Like the tabernacle of old (Ex 25:8), God will dwell in midst of his restored people Israel in the future temple (Ezek 43:7).

Ezekiel is not alone in prophesying a revised Levitical system in the future kingdom. Isaiah speaks of grain offerings and the observance of the Sabbaths (Isa 66:20-23). Jeremiah promises an enduring Levitical priesthood along with burnt offerings, grain offerings, and other sacrifices (Jer 33:18). The rest of the world will also be involved in temple worship, celebrating the Feast of Tabernacles every year (Zech 14:16). In fact, the comparisons between the OT Levitical system and worship in the millennial temple are too numerous to mention.

It must quickly be stated that the similarities between the two kingdoms do not indicate total identification. Few would suggest that the Mosaic Law is completely reinstated in the millennium. As Fruchtenbaum points out, “there will be a sacrificial system instituted in the Millennium that will have some features similar to the Mosaic system, along with some new laws. For that very reason, the sacrificial system of the Millennium must not be viewed as a reinstatement of the Mosaic system, because it is not.”<sup>163</sup> Walvoord agrees stating, [t]he details such as are offered for these sacrifices make it clear that it is a distinct system from the Mosaic, but that it involves animal sacrifices as well as other forms of worship similar to that provided in the Mosaic law.”<sup>164</sup> This being said, the numerous similarities between the OT kingdom and the future kingdom cannot be ignored, especially when one is considering the church as an instrument of socio-political institutional change.

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<sup>162</sup> Ezekiel specifically mentions the burnt offering (43:24, e.g.), guilt offering (40:38, e.g.), sin offering (43:19, e.g.), grain offering (42:13, e.g.), drink offering (45:17, e.g.), freewill offering (46:12, e.g.), and fellowship offering (46:2, e.g.) as functioning in the millennial temple.

<sup>163</sup> Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Ariel Ministries, 1989), 810.

<sup>164</sup> Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 311.

When one reads the descriptions of the Levitical system in the millennial kingdom, it becomes clear that the authors assume a large body of information is already known. The authors are more concerned with drawing distinctions than in re-stating similarities. For example, in references concerning burnt offerings, there is no description as to how to actually perform the rite. It appears that the instructions of Leviticus 1 and 6:8-13 are still operative. Certainly the original audience would have assumed so from the mention of the offering without any other explanation.

The same may be said for the governmental functions of the millennial kingdom as well. When the readers of Isaiah and Micah read that the law (תּוֹרָה) will go out from Zion to teach the nations to walk in the paths of the LORD (Isa 2:3; Micah 4:2), they would naturally assume the Mosaic law unless otherwise instructed. In fact, there is no reason to believe that the civil justice mandated by the law will be altered in any way in the future kingdom. The righteousness of God as expressed in the law is unchanging (Matt 5:18).

The relationship between the OT kingdom and the future kingdom with regard to civil justice is reinforced when one considers how the law was applied to the rest of the world (i.e. non-covenant nations). Moses declared that the greatness of Israel would be evident to the rest of the world because of the righteous statutes (הַחֻקִּים) and judgments (מִשְׁפָּטִים) he was setting before them in the law (תּוֹרָה - Deut 4:6, 8). It was because of their violation of the standards of the law that the pagan Caananites were vomited out of the land (Lev 18:24-28).

Recognizing the organic relationship between the statutes of the previous kingdom and the future kingdom has profound effects upon those who see an inaugurated-kingdom today. In fact, it is this relationship that is the basis for inaugurated-kingdom proponents to call for socio-political action. Moore, for example, appeals to the OT kingdom as the standard for the church's present political action.

Because the Davidic ruler reigns *presently* with justice and wisdom (Ps 72:1-2; Jer 23:5), believers are given an authoritative standard by which they may condemn political tyranny and domestic abuse of power, even by those who claim evangelical identity. International human rights abuses may be resisted in light of the King who one day will exercise righteous diplomacy between the nations (Isa 2:4). Believers cannot have the option of inaction against judicial abuses since they are presently ruled by One whom the Scriptures describe as judging His subjects with fairness and equity.

Likewise, a people who are governed even now by a Davidic King of whom it is written, “with righteousness he will judge the poor” (Isa 11:4), cannot ignore the political oppression of the underclass. ... Because the initially realized Kingdom is governed by the Davidic heir who is described as an advocate “for the afflicted of the earth” (Isa 11:4), evangelicals have the biblical impetus to plead for the life and liberty of the powerless in every stage of life.<sup>165</sup>

While inaugurated-kingdom adherents insist there is no visible political structure in the current manifestation of the kingdom, they do call for the church to confront the current social and political institutions in order to bring about kingdom justice. Thankfully, there is no claim of ushering in the kingdom in this task. Unfortunately, when one tries to discover *exactly* what is being called for, one must confront the propensity of some in this movement to talk in circles. How does the church “resist” international human rights abuses? What type of “action” against judicial abuse is being advocated? It appears that this subject is rarely discussed. It is quite clear, however, that the emerging consensus dismisses theonomy as a viable option.<sup>166</sup>

Carroll argues that the traditional dispensational understanding of the law, namely that the law is not applicable to the church, should be reevaluated. If one takes a canonical reading of the OT, the law may be seen as “paradigmatic—that is, not something to be

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<sup>165</sup> Moore, *Kingdom of Christ*, 70.

<sup>166</sup> [C]ontra all forms of dominion theology, this view of Kingdom activity helps to maintain the evangelical commitment to separation of church and state and religious liberty.” Ibid., 77. “The emerging consensus of the church as a Kingdom community must therefore articulate, contra attempts on both the left and the right, that the Kingdom of God in this era is manifested in the regenerate church, not in any secular government.” Ibid., 164-65.

reproduced in other times and places, but as examples of legislation that reflect the ethical demands of God.”<sup>167</sup> Although this statement is somewhat unclear, what is clear is that Carroll maintains that the law, not in its entirety, but in some degree and in some fashion is to be implemented today. “The challenge then is to ask ourselves what modern equivalents of similar ethical concerns might look like.”<sup>168</sup> One modern equivalent he proposes is the year of jubilee. This legislation (along with similar laws from surrounding nations) “echoes common human concerns for the poor and disenfranchised ... [and] ... it challenges us to discern how and why the Old Testament legislation envisions meeting these same needs and to try to envision today in what manner we might communicate these perspectives to our own society.”<sup>169</sup> Just as Israel was to impact the surrounding nations,<sup>170</sup> so the church is to impact its society.

Once again, a present kingdom theology is not necessary to come to the conclusion that modern society would benefit from studying the law and applying its principles. This is not new.<sup>171</sup> Yet Carroll does not go far enough. Logically, if the church is the physical

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<sup>167</sup> Carroll R., “Broadening Horizons, Redirecting Focus: A Response to Robert Pyne on Progressive Dispensationalism and Social Ethics,” 7.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>170</sup> Carroll references Deut 4:5-8, Ex 19:6, and Isa 2:3.

<sup>171</sup> “In concluding this discussion of the economic provisions in the laws of the historical kingdom, it must be admitted that the strict application of all these provisions in our modern world is probably impossible, since the original conditions cannot be reproduced by mere human ingenuity, and there is no immediate divinely accredited authority to originate and preside over any plan for the proper distribution of material wealth. Nevertheless, these provisions within the ancient economy of the historical kingdom can be studied with great profit by modern economists, and they should be given the attention which they deserve.” McClain, *Greatness of the Kingdom*, 80. It should be noted that a paradigmatic understanding of the year of jubilee is already present in our society, due primarily to the influence of the Puritans. Bankruptcy acts as a personal year of jubilee in that there is the forgiveness of all debt. The difference is that it is personal rather than general and based upon

manifestation of the coming kingdom, if the church is to be politically engaged in electoral politics, if the church is to challenge socio-political structures to bring about kingdom justice, then the only standard that can be brought to bear is the OT law. There is no other example in Scripture as to what a just and righteous society should look like. It is the OT law that is the biblically assumed model for the coming kingdom.

Therefore, only some type of continuity position with regards to the OT law is consistent with an already/not yet understanding of the kingdom. Such a continuity position *logically demands* a theonomic understanding of government. Any other position is logically incoherent. Since the relationship of the law to the church is such a vast topic, it will be taken up separately in the next section.

## SOCIO-POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND THE LAW

### The Problem of the Law

One of the foundational issues in any study of biblical ethics (including socio-political ethics) involves the use of the Mosaic Law. Ryrie accurately describes the fundamental problem:

The discussion of the end of the Mosaic law and the ramifications involved is one which usually bogs down in confusion. All interpreters of the Scripture are faced with the clear teaching that the death of Christ brought an end to the Mosaic law (Rom 10:4) while at the same time recognizing that some of the commandments of that law are restated clearly and without change in the epistles of the New Testament. Or to state the problem in the form of a question, it is this: How can the law be ended if portions of it are repeated after it supposedly ended?<sup>172</sup>

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perceived need rather than a pre-determined schedule. Thanks to Kevin K. Chapman, JD for pointing this out to the author.

<sup>172</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, "The End of the Law," *BSac* 124, no. 495 (1967): 239.

Not only is the law restated “clearly and without change” after its “end,” but there is also the issue of the law, at least as it is stated in the Decalogue, appearing before it was enacted at Sinai. Kaiser notes, “All Ten Commandments had been part of the law of God previously written on hearts instead of stone, for all ten appear, in one way or another, in Genesis.”<sup>173</sup> Additionally, the serious ramifications of the Old Testament’s witness concerning itself must be considered. After all, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple” (Psalm 19:7).<sup>174</sup> This divine quality of the OT cannot and should not be quickly dismissed in any discussion of ethics.

Few who take the Bible seriously would argue that the morality expressed in the OT should be ignored.<sup>175</sup> The problem that vexes commentators is what aspects of the law should be considered normative for ethical behavior in the church age, and what are limited to those directly under the law. This is a problem that is as old as the church. As Jonathon Edwards has observed, “There is perhaps no part of divinity attended with so much intricacy, and wherein

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<sup>173</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 82. “The first, Genesis 35:2: ‘Get rid of the foreign gods.’ The second, Genesis 31:39: Laban to Jacob: ‘But why did you steal my gods?’ The third, Genesis 24:3: ‘I want you to swear by the Lord.’ The fourth, Genesis 2:3: ‘God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.’ The fifth, Genesis 27:41: ‘The days of mourning my father are near.’ The sixth, Genesis 4:9: ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ The seventh, Genesis 39:9: ‘How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?’ The eighth, Genesis 44:4–7: ‘Why have you stolen my silver cup?’ (RSV) The ninth, Genesis 39:17: ‘[Joseph] came to me to make sport of me...but...he ran....’ The tenth, Genesis 12:18; 20:3: ‘You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman.’ Of course, not every one of these illustrations are equally clear, for the text does not pause to moralize on the narratives, but each would appear to add to the orders of creation already given in the first chapters of Genesis.” *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture references are taken from the New International Version.

<sup>175</sup> Glen Stassen and David Gushee are notable exceptions. See footnote 146.

orthodox divines do so much differ, as the stating of the precise agreement and difference between the two dispensations of Moses and of Christ.”<sup>176</sup>

This problem is compounded by the fact that there is an abundance of ethical material in the OT delivered in a variety of forms. One may find narrative passages that illustrate what one is or is not to do, proverbs, songs, preaching, prophecies, allegories, civil laws, ceremonies, all in addition to direct moral teaching. Thus the issue of genre complicates the issue of authority. Nevertheless, Kaiser is quite correct in stating that “The heart of Old Testament ethics is to be placed squarely on the explicit commands found mainly in the Pentateuch, but also to a lesser degree in the Prophets and Wisdom Books.”<sup>177</sup>

As one might expect, there is a variety of proposed solutions to the problem of the use of the Mosaic Law in ethics. Nevertheless, the solutions eventually reduce themselves into one of two approaches:<sup>178</sup> 1) *Everything* in the Mosaic law remains in force for the NT believer except that which the NT specifically *changes*, or 2) *Nothing* in the Mosaic law remains in force except that which the NT specifically *repeats*. These two understandings of the use of the Mosaic law can be described as stressing either continuity between the testaments or discontinuity. John Calvin championed the continuity position (option 1 above). Martin Luther taught the discontinuity position (option 2). As might be expected, each position has modern adherents and modifications.

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<sup>176</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God, concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church,” in *The Works of Jonathon Edwards* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 1:465.

<sup>177</sup> Kaiser, *OT Ethics*, 42.

<sup>178</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 147.



### Discontinuity Positions<sup>179</sup>

Luther rejected any attempt to base Christian behavior upon OT revelation that was not specifically repeated in the NT. There are at least three reasons for his understanding of the law. First, a major item for concern for Luther was the “tangible” nature of the OT kingdom and the “spiritual” nature of the church.<sup>180</sup> This distinction was pivotal to his understanding: “These are two kingdoms: the temporal, which governs with the sword and is visible; and the spiritual, which governs solely with grace and with the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>181</sup> Since the church was spiritual, the tangible nature of the law did not apply. Second, the law was given to the Jews, not to the church. “Here the law of Moses has its place. It is no longer binding on us because it was given only to the people of Israel.”<sup>182</sup> Third, Luther recognized the essential unity of the law. “Prove your case from the New Testament! The Old Testament has been set aside through Christ and is no longer binding. If it is binding, then you do not have Christ and you must observe the entire law.”<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Since this section is only for the purpose of drawing a distinction from the continuity positions, only an abbreviated treatment of this perspective will be given.

<sup>180</sup> Martin Luther, “How Christians Should Regard Moses,” in *Word and Sacrament*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 35:163.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 35:164. “It is well to remember, too, that since God himself calls this kingdom a new kingdom, it must be a far more glorious kingdom than the old kingdom was or is. It was God’s will to make it a far better kingdom than the old one. Even if this new kingdom had no other glory, this alone would be enough to make it glorious beyond measure: that it is to be an everlasting kingdom that will not come to an end like the old, worldly kingdom.” Martin Luther, “A New Preface to the Prophet Ezekiel,” in *Word and Sacrament*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 35:289.

<sup>182</sup> Luther, “Regarding Moses,” 35:164. Concerning the validity of monastic vows, Luther wrote, “Therefore there is one answer that can be made to all attempts to cite passages from the Old Testament to support [monastic] vows. One need merely ask, ‘Do you Christians want to be Jews?’” Martin Luther, “An Answer to Several Questions on Monastic Vows: A Very Comforting Message to All Who Are Leaving the Priesthood and Monastic and Conventual Orders,” in *The Christian in Society*, ed. Robert C. Schultz, Luther’s Works (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 35:146.

<sup>183</sup> Luther, “Monastic Vows,” 35:146.

Traditional dispensationalists consider Luther's arguments to be valid. While they do not accept his view of the church in its entirety, they do maintain the physical/spiritual distinction he draws.<sup>184</sup> Likewise, they stress the covenant nature of the law as given to Israel and the essential unity of the law.

### Continuity Positions

Those views that stress continuity between the testaments maintain that certain aspects of the Mosaic Law continue into the church age. While there are variations within this general category, almost no one accepts the entire law—as originally written and understood—as being in force today. This author is aware of no one in this category that would advocate a return to the system of sacrifices, for example. Nevertheless, while the whole law does not remain, certain aspects of it are binding upon the believer. Calvin argues:

Certain ignorant persons...rashly cast out the whole of Moses, and bid farewell to the two Tables of the Law. For they think it obviously alien to Christians to hold to a doctrine that contains the "dispensation of death." Banish this wicked thought from our minds!...But if no one can deny that a perfect pattern of righteousness stands forth in the law, either we need no rule to live rightly and justly, or it is forbidden to depart from the law. There are not many rules, but one everlasting and unchangeable rule to live by. For this reason we are not to refer solely to one age David's statement that the life of a righteous man is a continual meditation upon the law, for it is just as applicable to every age, even to the end of the world.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> For a more complete discussion of the differing natures of Israel and the church see Bruce A. Baker, "Israel and the Church: The Transcendental Distinction Within the Dispensational Tradition," *The Journal of Ministry & Theology* 8, no. 2 (2004).

<sup>185</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. XX (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 2.7.13.

Calvin responds to those who would argue that keeping the law places one under a curse (Gal 3:10) by arguing that there is a difference between the moral requirements of the law—which remain—and the law’s ability to impose judgment—which has been abrogated. Since Christ was made a curse for us, our inability to keep the law has already been punished. Therefore, the moral requirements of the law are still in effect while the ability to judge has been removed.

What Paul says of the curse unquestionably applies not to the ordinance itself but solely to its force to bind the conscience. The law not only teaches but forthrightly enforces what it commands. If it be not obeyed—indeed, if one in any respect fail in his duty—the law unleashes the thunderbolt of its curse. ... What does this mean? That we should not be borne down by an unending bondage, which would agonize our consciences with the fear of death. Meanwhile this always remains an unassailable fact: no part of the authority of the law is withdrawn without our having always to receive it with the same veneration and obedience.<sup>186</sup>

This general position, as outlined by Calvin, has evolved into two separate, yet related, schools of thought: The more inclusive use of the law as exemplified by Christian reconstructionists or theonomists, and the more moderate position of the more common non-theonomic reformed thought.

#### Non-Theonomic Reformed<sup>187</sup> Understanding of the Law

##### **The Relationship between the Biblical Covenants**

“The Reformed view of the law is integrated with an understanding of the covenant.”<sup>188</sup> When appealing to “the covenant” without further explanation, reformed

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 2.7.15.

<sup>187</sup> The name for this position was taken from the chapter description for the reformed position of Willem VanGemeran in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

<sup>188</sup> Willem A. VanGemeran, “The Law is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ: A Reformed Perspective,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 46.

theologians almost always are referring to the theological covenant of grace. Since dispensationalists do not usually recognize the covenant of grace as an organizing principle, there is little common ground here to be discussed. On the other hand, there is much to discuss in their understanding of the relationship between the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants. Their unique interpretation of these two covenants is due primarily to their understanding of the relationship between the concepts *law* and *covenant*.

The reformed position maintains that the word *covenant* “denotes a relationship that the Lord sovereignly and graciously establishes and maintains, whereas *law* denotes the order that is required for that relationship to be meaningful.”<sup>189</sup> Thus, “biblical law, whatever its particular expression, can be properly understood only within a covenantal framework, which always means a context of divine grace.”<sup>190</sup> For this reason, the covenant which established the gracious relationship—namely the Abrahamic Covenant—and the covenant which established the order for maintaining that relationship—the Mosaic Covenant—are actually two sides of the same coin. The relationship of the two covenants is not that of A to A (complete continuity) nor A to B (discontinuity) but rather A<sup>1</sup> to A<sup>2</sup> (modified continuity).<sup>191</sup> Chamblin asserts, “The great event which provides the setting for the Sinaitic Covenant is itself an expression of the Abrahamic Covenant.”<sup>192</sup> As Douma explains it,

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Knox Chamblin, “The Law of Moses and The Law of Christ,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments, Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), 182.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 184.

God had bound Himself by oath to Abraham, promising to make his descendants numerous and to make them a blessing for all the nations of the earth. When He introduced Himself to Moses, God was thinking back to that covenant. ... This covenant, established long ago with the fathers, was being renewed here at Sinai.<sup>193</sup>

Thus, since the Abrahamic covenant is an enduring covenant, the Mosaic is enduring as well.

In keeping with Ezekiel 36:27—” And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws”— those who take this position maintain that the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31–34 is actually “not a new law but a new and more personal administration of the old (Mosaic) law.”<sup>194</sup> The statement “It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers” (Jer 31:32) is understood to mean that the form of the covenant is different, but not the substance. “The formal difference lies in the coming of Jesus Christ: his atonement, his present ministry, and the work of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>195</sup> As a result, “Under the new covenant, the law can never again be read, interpreted, or applied apart from Jesus Christ. He modeled the perfection of the law and simplified it. The ceremonial laws, civil laws, and the penal code have been abrogated, and the moral law has received further clarification in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ.”<sup>196</sup>

It is because of the coming of Christ and the subsequent inauguration of the New Covenant, that the entire law has undergone a transformation. There is some measure of discontinuity in the form and shape of the law, but not in its being or essence. It is not a

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<sup>193</sup> J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1996), 2–3.

<sup>194</sup> Chamblin, “Law of Moses & Law of Christ,” 187.

<sup>195</sup> VanGemeran, “Law,” 36.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

different law from what was given at Sinai, but rather a “newly administered and more deeply expounded”<sup>197</sup> law than before.

### **Relationship of the Church to the Body Politic**

Up until this point in the discussion, reformed theologians would be nearly unanimous in their agreement. It is at this juncture, however, that there is a parting of the ways.

Reformed theology has traditionally recognized three kinds of law within the Mosaic Law, as outlined by the Westminster Confession of Faith: the moral, the ceremonial, and the civil.<sup>198</sup> The moral law is considered binding upon all people at all times, therefore, the moral law is binding upon the believer today. The ceremonial law is considered fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ, and is therefore no longer binding. Its function is as teacher only, pointing to Christ. But what of the civil law?

Kaiser calls the political use of the law an “unresolved issue” in the larger discussion of law and grace—a discussion that is rife with “traditional unanswered questions.”<sup>199</sup> One might expect that the political use of the law has been unresolved in modern reformed

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<sup>197</sup> Chamblin, “Law of Moses & Law of Christ,” 182.

<sup>198</sup> “Besides this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly, holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the New Testament. To them also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging under any now, further than the general equity thereof may require.” Westminster Confession, Chapter 19, §3–4. These three uses of the law have traditionally been known as the *usus politicus* (external in applicability and civil, it prohibits and punishes), the *usus pedagogues* (informs and instructs the heart and the conscience, preaching damnation, accusing and pointing to Christ), and the *usus normativus* (showing the believer what God requires). Geoffrey H. Greenhough, “The Reformers’ Attitude to the Law of God,” *WTJ* 39, no. 1 (1976): 89.

<sup>199</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, “God’s Promise Plan and His Gracious Law,” *JETS* 33, no. 3 (1990): 289.

thought, at least in part, because the issue was substantially ignored until the advent of dominion theology in the early 1970s. This neglect, however, is no longer possible.<sup>200</sup>

Many contemporary reformed scholars maintain that the civil laws given to Israel are not binding upon society in general, but instead have been transferred to the ecclesiastical functions of the church. The body politic to whom the law was originally given was the nation of Israel. Since the coming of Christ, however, and the inauguration of the New Covenant, the Church has supplanted Israel. Chamblin argues, “the NT counterpart to OT Israel, considered as ‘a body politic,’ is the Christian church, not the pluralistic society amidst which she stands.”<sup>201</sup> As a result, “The counterpart to the Israelite courts is the Christian church meeting in judicial assembly by the authority of Christ and his apostles.”<sup>202</sup> Therefore, lawsuits are no longer to be handled by civil courts, but are to be heard by the church instead (1 Cor 6:1–4). In the same way, the issue of incest in the Corinthian church was met with excommunication, the ecclesiastical equivalent of the death penalty.<sup>203</sup> Thus, Chamblin concludes “In *some* sense, the entirety of the law remains in force. ... While the whole law is *preserved*, it is just as surely *transformed* and *reshaped* in the hands of Jesus and the apostles.”<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Although old habits, it appears, die hard. In his essay on the relationship between law and grace from a non-theonomic reformed perspective, VanGemeran never addresses the subject of the political use of the law, even in passing. VanGemeran, “Law.” As one might expect, this omission is not lost on Bahnsen! “One suspects this is because the author is uncomfortable with that aspect of historic Reformed thinking and practice.” Greg L. Bahnsen, “Response to Willem A. VanGemeran,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 62 n1.

<sup>201</sup> Chamblin, “Law of Moses & Law of Christ,” 188.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.* This is Moore’s position as well. See footnote 90.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

## Evaluation

### Exegetical Concerns

One of the fundamental problems with this position is that it fails to account for the NT teaching concerning the foundational unity of the law. Moo observes, “Of Paul’s 119 uses of *nomos*, none occurs in the plural. ... [T]his statistic should be regarded as significant: Paul discusses the law as a single entity rather than a series of commands.”<sup>205</sup> Therefore, if the law is an indivisible unit, it follows that there is a certain “all or nothing” quality about it.

This understanding of the law as a unit is supported by at least three NT texts:<sup>206</sup>

**Matt 5:19** Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

**Gal 5:3** Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.

**James 2:10** For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

The major factor in each of these verses is the stress on keeping the whole law. While it is true that the law consists of some commands more important than others, Jesus was clear that the weightier commands were to be kept without neglecting the lesser ones.<sup>207</sup> One may not pick and choose which parts of the law to obey. In the OT, the temptation evidently was to keep the ceremonial aspects of the law, while ignoring its moral requirements.<sup>208</sup> This approach to the law turns that temptation on its head. Here, the ceremonial and civil law is set aside while the

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<sup>205</sup> Douglas J. Moo, ““Law,” “Works of the Law,” and Legalism in Paul,” *WTJ* 45, no. 1 (1983): 75.

<sup>206</sup> Unless otherwise state, all biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version.

<sup>207</sup> Matt 23:23

<sup>208</sup> See, for example 1 Sam 15:22–23; Psa 51:16–17; Isa 1:11–17; Jer 7:21–23; and Micah 6:8.



moral law is retained. What is consistent in both these tendencies is the urge to dissect the law into component parts that may exist independently of the others.

Another weakness of this position is that it fails to adequately account for the responsibility that God has given civil government in the church age. The civil ruler is a minister of God to promote good and punish evil in society at large (Rom 13:1–7). But what principles is the civil government to use when determining such vague concepts as good, evil, and justice? Is the civil ruler to appeal to the law of God? According to this position, the civil use of the law has been transferred to the church. It is, therefore, binding upon believers, but not upon society as a whole. From where then does the secular government's God-given authority derive? If one says the law as modeled by the church, then one has moved into incoherence, for there is no appreciable difference between saying that "the secular government is to model the law as it is binding on the church" and "the law is binding upon the secular government." If one says that government's God-given authority is derived by some other means, then it must be shown exactly what those other means are. Is the responsibility that government has to God one of law? If so, which law? If not law, then how is one to understand it?

Perhaps this particular problem may be better understood if an actual case were examined. If incest is under the authority of the church—since the Mosaic Law has been transformed and transferred to the church and not the civil authority—why is this not true of other capital crimes like murder, kidnapping, or rape? If a murderer is excommunicated and then repents, and is subsequently restored to the church, is that the end of the matter? Does this abrogate the civil government's claim on his life? If yes, then does the church have priority over the state as has been claimed in the past? If not, then does the civil law take precedence over the law of God? How can this be? Kline was correct when he stated that a

reordering of the traditional reformed understanding with regard to civil law “has left us with standards whose proper legal interpretation is perplexed by ambiguities.”<sup>209</sup>

#### Cultural Accommodation?

Third, while there is significant justification for the setting aside of the ceremonial law through the sacrifice of Christ, the paucity of evidence for the transference of civil law to the church is telling. The justification, therefore, seems to be not so much from clear Scriptural evidence, but rather a tendency to accommodate the democratic and pluralistic mood of contemporary North American society, especially in its insistence on the separation of church and state. The main redeeming feature of this approach’s transference of the OT law to the church appears to be that it does not offend our contemporary democratic ideals. Bahnsen’s comment is telling.

I can still recall the initial embarrassment I felt when college and university instructors would point a critical finger at the political ethic of my Calvinist forefathers, say in Geneva or Puritan New England. As an “enlightened, modern, tolerant” thinker, I tried to find ways to explain the error of my Reformed predecessors....<sup>210</sup>

This type of embarrassment is certainly not new, particularly in the United States. It seems to have been a regular temptation to set forth a theology of government that served simply as an apology for the American political system. Mark Noll observes,

Like Europe, American protestants of all sorts did accommodate themselves to republican and democratic ideas. ... The churches in 1790 flourished in America by accepting as given the separation of church and state—a Lockean, contractual view of government. No thought for any kind of divine right of rule. No thought for even a kind of explicitly Christian orientation of government. But in what was considered to be a

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<sup>209</sup> Meredith G. Kline, “Comments on an Old-New Error,” *WTJ* 41, no. 1 (1978): 173.

<sup>210</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen, *The Theonomic Thesis in Confessional and Historical Perspective* (Covenant Media Foundation, 1980, accessed Oct 27 2006); available from <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pe144.htm>.

neutral libertarian or freedom-enhancing form of government, the churches went wild and actually did a lot of great work.<sup>211</sup>

This accommodation took perhaps its most radical form in the 1788 revision of the Westminster Confession of Faith.<sup>212</sup> The first American Presbyterian Assembly (1787–1789) rewrote (and essentially negated) Chapter XXIII, paragraph 3 on the powers of the civil magistrate so that it more closely aligned with democratic ideals of freedom of religion. The original paragraph read, in part, that the civil magistrate’s duties include:

to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administrated, and observed.<sup>213</sup> For all the better effecting whereof, he has power to call synods, to be present at them and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.<sup>214</sup>

The American revision of the confession, adopted the same year the U.S. Constitution was ratified, directly contradicts the original document. In the revised version, the civil magistrate may not

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<sup>211</sup> Mark Noll, *Law, Politics & Earlier Christians* (Charlottesville, VA: Mars Hill Audio).

<sup>212</sup> Authored by approximately one hundred Puritan theologians, the Westminster Confession of Faith was adopted in 1646.

<sup>213</sup> The Confession list the following references as justification of this position: Isa 49:23; Psa 122:9; Ezra 7:23, 25-28; Lev 24:16; Deut 13:5-6, 12; 2 Kings 18:4; 1 Chron 13:1-9; 2 Kings 24:1-26; 2 Chron 34:33; 15:12-13.

<sup>214</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), XXIII:3. This last sentence is justified by the following passages: 2 Chron 19:8-11; 29; 30; Matt 2:4-5. It should be noted that Westminster did not put forward a unique or even novel viewpoint on this subject. The Belgic Confession, as revised in the Synod of Dordt, asserts, “And their office is, not only to have regard unto, and watch for the welfare of the civil state; but also that they protect the sacred ministry; and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship.” (Article XXXVI: Of Magistrates).

interfere in the matter of faith. Yet, as nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the Church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. And, as Jesus Christ hath appointed a regular government and discipline in his Church, no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief. It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretence of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever: and to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.<sup>215</sup>

In fairness, it should be noted that not all consider this a cultural accommodation. Bahnsen, for example, feels that this was merely an attempt to clarify the original version's understanding of church-state relations. He writes, "Thus it is best to regard the 1788 rewriting of that section as a recasting of the earlier doctrine in language which would more clearly express the separation of church and state which was implicit all along (and explicitly asserted in the opening words of the section)."<sup>216</sup> In contrast, Gary North complains that the American Presbyterians "gutted" the original statement and therefore, "moved forthrightly onto a long road that leads into culturally muddled theology."<sup>217</sup>

Perhaps the best way to understand the original statement concerning the civil magistrate is in light of the memorable Michael Servetus incident which took place in Calvin's

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<sup>215</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith (American Revision of 1788), XXIII:3.

<sup>216</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 3d ed. (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2002), 519. Nevertheless, this version "failed to include the important statement of the orthodox version to the effect that the magistrate must govern in accord with God's law. Hence there was some gain, but a significant loss in the rewritten form of 23.3." *Ibid.*, 520.

<sup>217</sup> Gary North, *Theonomy: An Informed Response* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), 344.

Geneva.<sup>218</sup> Servetus was a radical reformer, who was deeply religious. Wishing to restore what he considered to be true Christianity, he rejected the accepted doctrine of the Trinity, predestination, and infant baptism. He also maintained that the Millennial Kingdom was about to begin. At Calvin's insistence, he was arrested while passing through Geneva as he fled Roman Catholic authorities that had condemned him for heresy in Vienna. He was tried for heresy—specifically that he denied the Trinity and rejected baptism— by the civil authorities, found guilty as charged, and was burned at the stake in 1553. This seems to be the best exposition of the confession's charge to the civil magistrate: "to take order that...the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed...."

Citizens of the United States, nurtured from their youth on the doctrine of the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bill of Rights, find this application of the confession disturbing. Nevertheless, the question is not whether or not this is in accordance with our American system of government, but is this, in effect, an accurate understanding of the Church's biblical mandate?<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> This entire account is taken from Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 2 vols., vol. 2: A. D. 1500—A. D. 1975 (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1997), 759.

<sup>219</sup> Kline calls the original statement in the confession "manifestly unbiblical by the mass of those who stand in that confessional tradition (as well as by virtually all other students of the Scriptures)." Kline, "Comments," 173. His main line of reasoning, however, is that this understanding does not fit the typology of Israel to Christ. Nevertheless, despite the lack of direct Scriptural statement, he maintains, "What we are talking about here is not something illusively subtle or profound, but big and plain and simple." *Ibid.*, 175. Williamson agrees that the original confession is unbiblical at this point, and yet offers no exegetical evidence whatsoever to substantiate this assertion. G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1964), 245. What little evidence he does offer is entirely empirical. Pointing to the many ways that civil interference in the church has led to much suffering, he appeals to the Scottish Covenanters "who were called upon to suffer unto death from civil oppression" as an authority to reject civil entanglements in the church. *Ibid.*, 256. Irons also attacks the original understanding of Westminster, but undermines one of the fundamental presuppositions (the continuity of the Mosaic Covenant with that of the New Covenant) of the non-theonomic reformed position in doing so. Lee Irons, "The Reformed Theocrats: A Biblical Theological Response," in *Christian Body Politic: 21st Century Reformed Christian Perspectives on Church and State*, ed. Christian Kim (Cheltenham: Hermit Kingdom Press, 2004), 91–96.

## Conclusion

Aside from the standard disagreements that dispensationalists have with reformed theology (the blending of the biblical covenants, the centrality of the theological covenants, the supersessionist view of Israel and the church, among others), the non-theonomic understanding of the law should be rejected in particular. First, it fails to account for the fundamental unity of the law. Second, it fails to adequately account for the basis and standard for law in civil government. Third, this understanding of law is at odds with the logically consistent historical reformed theology in what appears to be a cultural accommodation. Historic reformed theology is nothing if not logically consistent. Changes in this theological system, particularly changes designed to be less offensive to society as a whole, are prone to produce inconsistency and incoherence, as this change has done.

## Theonomic Understanding of the Law<sup>220</sup>

### The Abiding Character of God

As one might expect, the theonomic position has much in common with the non-theonomic position stated above, since both draw their family tree to the same *pater familias*. The primary difference between these positions is one of scope. In other words, the distinction between these two approaches is how far theonomy takes the foundational assumption. For both schools of thought, the primary methodological point is to assume believers in the church age still have an obligation to obey any OT command unless that command is

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<sup>220</sup> While there are several men who could be considered prominent theonomists, this section will deal almost exclusively with the writings of Greg Bahnsen. In this author's opinion, he is not only one of the most prolific authors and speakers, but also one of the most articulate and well-reasoned spokesmen for this movement.

abrogated by the NT. Theonomists, in contrast to the more modern and more common reformed understanding, take this assumption to its natural inference:

To this methodological point we can add the *substantive conclusion* that the New Testament does not teach any radical change in God's law regarding the standards of *socio-political morality*. God's law as it touches upon the duty of civil magistrates has not been altered in any systematic or fundamental way in the New Testament. Consequently, ... we must recognize the continuing obligation of civil magistrates to obey and enforce the relevant laws of the Old Testament, including the penal sanctions specified by the just Judge of all the earth. As with the rest of God's law, we must presume continuity of binding authority regarding the socio-political commandments revealed as standing law in the Old Testament.<sup>221</sup>

By stating that the "socio-political morality" of God's law has not changed, theonomists are making a very simple, yet profound point. If it was in accordance with God's will to consider homosexuality a capital crime in the OT, then it is incumbent upon society today to view this crime in the same way. If witchcraft, idolatry, bestiality, incest, kidnapping (among others) were worthy of the death penalty in the OT, then they are worthy of it today. After all, theonomists argue, the law of God was based upon his unchanging character. Since God has not changed, neither has his understanding of social morality and justice.

### **Historic Continuity**

One of the constant emphasis in the writings and sermons of theonomists is the continuity of this position with the historic reformed confessions and the writings of Calvin (among many others). In this assertion there is little debate.<sup>222</sup> Klien observes, "At the same

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<sup>221</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen, *By This Standard: The Authority of God's Law Today* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985), 3-4.

<sup>222</sup> Most, but not all, agree with this claim. See G. Aiken Taylor, "Theonomy and Christian Behavior," *The Presbyterian Journal* 37, no. 20 (1978).

time it must be said that Chalcedon<sup>223</sup> is not without roots in respectable ecclesiastical tradition. It is in fact a revival of certain teaching contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith—at least in the Confession’s original formulations.”<sup>224</sup> It was this ecclesiastical tradition that was the driving force behind Bahnsen’s position. It was not his desire to go beyond what Westminster confessed, but rather “to uphold and defend the Confession’s Reformed or Puritan position regarding the standard of Christian ethics. ... [M]y intention was not to present something novel and creative, but to resurrect a golden heritage—to present a Biblical and consistent case for the Confessional viewpoint I had always known and loved.”<sup>225</sup>

Calvin maintained that, while the church and the civil authority held separate jurisdictions and powers,<sup>226</sup> the church and the Christian magistrate were to work in close cooperation with one another. “And as the magistrate ought by punishment and physical restraint to cleanse the church of offenses, so the minister of the Word in turn ought to help the magistrate in order that not so many may sin. Their functions ought to be so joined that each serves to help, not hinder the other.”<sup>227</sup> The reason for this cooperation is found in their respective relationships to God’s law. While the church is subject to the law of God, the

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<sup>223</sup> A reference the Chalcedon Foundation, established in 1965, an organization devoted to research, publishing, and promoting Christian reconstruction in all areas of life.

<sup>224</sup> Kline, “Comments,” 173. Kline adds, however, “These particular elements in the Confession, long since rejected as manifestly unbiblical by the mass of those who stand in that confessional tradition (as well as by virtually all other students of the Scriptures), have been subjected to official revision.” Ibid. This rejection as “manifestly unbiblical” will be shown to be, not the result of reasoned exegesis but merely a cultural accommodation.

<sup>225</sup> Bahnsen, “*Historical Perspective*,” 11.

<sup>226</sup> “The two conceptions are very different. The church does not assume what is proper to the magistrate; nor can the magistrate execute what is carried out by the church.” Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.11.3.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.



Christian magistrate is subject to the church. “For the magistrate, if he is godly, will not want to exempt himself from the common subjection of God’s children. It is by no means the least significant part of this for him to subject himself to the church, which judges according to God’s Word.”<sup>228</sup>

### **The Divine Authority of Government**

It is important to remember at this point, that the issue is not how the church should behave toward government that is not godly, but rather what is government’s obligation towards God, who gives the magistrate his authority. Romans 13, after all, was most likely written during the reign of the infamous Nero. Yet despite his infidelity to his divinely ordained mandate, he was still responsible to God for the promotion of good and the punishing of evil. Nor will it do to appeal to a democratic ideal of freedom of religion or pluralistic notion of truth as an objection. Bahnsen correctly observes that “obedience to the law of God is a ‘must’ for *all* men, saved or unsaved, before and after regeneration; it does not *become* a requirement simply after salvation.”<sup>229</sup> Those that rebel are merely storing up wrath against themselves for the day of God’s wrath, “when his righteous judgment will be revealed.”<sup>230</sup>

Therefore, one should not expect government to find ultimate standards of right and wrong, morality and immorality, justice and equality in such corrupt things as the will of an educated elite or even majority vote. “It stands to reason that God’s objective and unchanging standards for civil government are found in the infallible, inscripturated Word of God, in those

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 4.11.4.

<sup>229</sup> Bahnsen, “*Historical Perspective*,” 11.

<sup>230</sup> Romans 2:5

passages where it speaks about political ethics.”<sup>231</sup> The fact that the vast majority of these passages are found in the OT concerning the nation of Israel is no problem to this viewpoint because of its fundamental assumption regarding the continuity of the testaments.

It should be noted that the divine authority of government not only prescribes what must be considered a crime (along with the appropriate punishment), but it also limits government’s ability to prescribe behavior. As Bahnsen observes,

[L]est our states become lawless beasts (c.f. 2 Thess. 2:3; Rev. 13:16–17), there must be objective limits to legal coercion, a law above the civil law to which appeal can be made against injustice and oppression. This objective criterion is the revealed law of God in its prescriptions of civil penalties for misdeeds. God’s law enables us to distinguish consistently and on principle sin from crime, personal morality from civil legality, social from political ethics, and areas where the state may properly legislate from areas where it must not interfere.<sup>232</sup>

### **Evaluation**

This position has answered two of the objections towards the non-theonomic position. First, theonomy has refused to accommodate the culture. Instead it maintains the logically consistent view of the reformers with regard to civil government. It, therefore, remains internally consistent and coherent. Second, it adequately accounts for the

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<sup>231</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen, “The Theonomic Reformed Approach to Law and Gospel,” in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 124.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 126. Bahnsen continues his discussion of this principle by providing examples where both politically conservative and liberal evangelicals have transgressed this principle. “Those with conservative leanings have tended to promote ethically commendable goals (sobriety regarding alcoholic beverages, restriction of smoking, intervention to curtail the geopolitical spread of Communism) by less than ethical means, calling upon the state to exercise its power of compulsion where no biblical warrant for it can be cogently adduced. Likewise, those with liberal leanings have tended to promote ethically commendable goals (racial integration, food or medical care for the poor, public education) by less than ethical means, calling upon the state to exercise its power of compulsion where no biblical warrant for it can be cogently adduced. No matter how ethically good these various projects may be, attempting to get the civil authorities to enforce them without warrant from God’s Word is to capitulate to the unprincipled position of Thrasymachus, who taught that what counts as ‘justice’ is simply whatever happens to be in the interest of the stronger faction in society.” Ibid., 127.

responsibility that God has given civil government in the church age when one assumes a continuity position with the law. Theonomists have a well-articulated view of government that answers the larger questions of authority, justice, and morality.

Unfortunately, it fails to address the more important issue of the unity of the law. As with all of reformed theology, it unnaturally divides the law into components that appear to be divisible. It is true that theonomists maintain the unity of the law better than non-theonomists, but it nevertheless asserts that one part of the law (the cultic or ceremonial aspects) may be annulled by the sacrifice of Christ, while the rest of the law remains binding.<sup>233</sup>

Another problem with reformed theology in general is its insistence that some of the covenants are essentially one without justification as to why the other covenants are excluded. Put another way, what justification is there for linking the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and New covenants all the while excluding the Land and Davidic covenants from consideration? One would think that any discussion of the political ramifications of the Abrahamic-Mosaic-New covenant(s) would include the blessings that come from obedience (Land covenant). Likewise, some explanation on Christ's reign as fulfillment of the Davidic covenant with regard to supernatural gifts seems necessary, particularly when one considers theonomy from a post-millennial understanding of the kingdom.<sup>234</sup> If the kingdom is indeed a physical entity, then

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<sup>233</sup> Interestingly, progressive dispensationalism shares this problem, but in a different way. They should have no trouble with the cultic requirements of the law since they will be fulfilled in the future kingdom. Hullinger's notion of clean and unclean in the temple explains why animal sacrifices will be required in the future kingdom and why they are not now. Hullinger, "Uncleanness." Nevertheless, progressive dispensationalism unnaturally divides the law by rejecting the governmental and civil portions of it. In both cases, the essential unity of the law is compromised.

<sup>234</sup> Kenneth Gentry asserts that "Christian Reconstructionism as a distinctive school of thought within the Reformed tradition is founded upon five basic theological premises: (1) Calvinistic soteriology; (2) covenantal theology; (3) postmillennial eschatology; (4) presuppositional apologetics; and (5) theonomic ethics: the cornerstone of Reconstruction thought." Kenneth L. Gentry, "Preface to the Third Edition," in *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2002), xv. Yet, somewhat puzzlingly, he also contends "A common error of some theonomy opponents is to assume that theonomy entails postmillennialism. The two

one must account (in some way) for the signs of the kingdom. It is interesting to note that movement towards this understanding may indeed be happening. One of the surprising developments in this discussion is the growing rapprochement between reconstructionism and the charismatic movement.<sup>235</sup>

### **Conclusion**

While theonomy maintains a more consistently logical and coherent reformed theology than the one previously discussed, the main difficulty in reformed theology remains, namely, the linking of the biblical covenants into essentially one theological covenant. This one theological covenant then overrides the natural (and biblical) distinction between Israel and the church. Thus, while theonomists' conclusions flow logically from their presuppositions, these fundamental assumptions must be rejected.

## CONCLUSIONS REGARDING SOCIO-POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

### **Progressive Dispensationalism and Theonomy**

Assuming an inaugurated-kingdom that is a partial, but nevertheless physical manifestation of the future consummated kingdom carries with it logical conclusions that

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theological constructs, however, are distinct; in no way do they stand or fall together. Postmillennialism is concerned with 'what *will* be'; theonomy focuses on 'what *should* be.' Many theonomists are amillennialists; few postmillennialists are theonomists." Ibid., n2. This attempt to distinguish between "reconstructionism"—where the goal is to "reconstruct" society on the basis of the Mosaic Law—and theonomy, which is the exegetical understanding of the Mosaic law being binding on society in general, appears, at least to this author, to generate distinction without a difference. For if the OT law is binding upon society, then the individual believer is responsible to act as salt and light and attempt to implement that law, regardless of the chances of success. Thus it is difficult to see a consistent theonomy without a reconstructionist agenda.

<sup>235</sup> See "Heat and Light: The Charismatic Connection (Appendix A)" in H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse* (Portland: Multnomah, 1988).

might not be immediately evident. One necessary conclusion is a theonomistic view of socio-political action.

Both the emerging consensus and reconstructionism assume the presence of the literal, physical kingdom of God in the present. While the future expectations of many within these movements may differ substantially, it is the understanding of the present that informs contemporary obligations. If the present manifestation of the kingdom is linked to *either the future manifestation or the past manifestation of the kingdom*, an adoption of OT governmental sanctions in one form or another must be adopted.

If the present is linked to the past, as in the continuity position of theonomy, then the righteous requirements of the law are still binding upon secular government because of the unified nature of the law. If the present kingdom is linked with the future kingdom, as in progressive dispensationalism and the emerging evangelical perspective, the same requirements are in place since the governmental sanctions of the future kingdom are based upon the OT kingdom. These governmental sanctions are only in place if it is the call of the church to engage in socio-political action. This is, of course, exactly what is being called for. While proponents of this viewpoint go to great lengths to limit socio-political action to actions within the church as a model for society, their calls for the involvement in electoral politics, engagement of economic injustice, and the rationale that the church is to seek kingdom righteousness speak to a larger role that has been traditionally held.

### **The Missing Element**

One disturbing aspect of this entire discussion is the lack of a straightforward biblical command for political action by the church. There have been no exegetical arguments concerning the context of a particular passage, no discussion of the subtleties of vocabulary, no debate regarding historical setting. This is because there is simply a lack of instruction in

the NT with regard to the church's engagement in—with a view to change—the political and social structures of this world.

There is plenty of opportunity for such instruction. Paul wrote Romans 13 during the reign of Nero. While the franchise was far from universal, one must assume that at least some of Paul's readers had the right to vote. Why didn't he instruct them in this matter? When Paul had the opportunity to confront a societal wrong (slavery) when he returned Onesimus to Philemon, why didn't he plead with Philemon to release Onesimus as an example to the world of kingdom justice? When our risen Lord spoke to the church in Smyrna regarding their suffering (Rev 2:8-11), why did he point to the crown of life as their only hope? Why didn't he mention his current kingship and how their suffering would set an example that would bring about societal change? One realizes that this is an argument from silence, but in this particular case, the silence is deafening! If one is going to state an action as a mandate upon the universal church, so that failure to carry out the mandate is sinful rebellion (for what else is disobedience to the commands of God?), then one would hope for specific commands to be followed, not the stringing together of theological concepts.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Finally it should be said that this author is all too aware of the shortcomings of this study. The arguments of the emerging evangelical consensus in general and progressive dispensationalism in particular, at least on this topic, are, in this author's opinion at least, far from clear. If there is evidence that should have been included in this study but has been overlooked, it is hoped that, in a spirit of loving correction, those who hold to an alternative position will produce it, so that all may achieve a better understanding of this topic. For this author echoes the words of Basil: "If any one has a better interpretation to give, and can consistently with true religion amend what I say, let him speak and let him amend, and the

Lord will reward him for me. There is no jealousy in my heart. I have not approached this investigation of these passages for strife and vain glory. I have done so to help my brothers....”<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>236</sup> Basil, *Letters*, Letter VIII.

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