

The Work of Christ as King

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“So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, ‘You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.’ But when they said, ‘Give us a king to lead us,’ this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. And the LORD told him: ‘Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king’ (1 Sa 8:4-7).¹

During the Old Testament era until the time of the prophet Samuel, the Chosen People of God were led by God’s own spokesmen, the prophets. It is not until the lifetime of Samuel that Israel became a kingdom.

We encounter a king and a priest of the Lord in the mysterious character of Melchizedek in the story of Abraham (Ge 14:18, Heb 7; see also Heb 5:6,10; 6:20), but he is not tied to the people of Israel as their king. His dynasty and priesthood are hidden in mystery, and the epistle to the Hebrews describes this person as a shadow of Christ.

When the people of Israel demand a king of their own from Samuel the prophet, God tells him that this in reality is a departure from the Lord as their true King. Samuel quotes them as saying, “You said: ‘We want a king to rule over us’—even though the Lord your God was your king” (1 Sa 12:12).²

Israel praised the Lord after the Exodus out of Egypt:

“Yahweh will be king for ever and ever” (Exod.15:18, NJB).³

Despite His remarks about the election of an earthly king over His people, the Lord blessed the kingship of Israel. It is God himself who enthroned the king of Israel, but he restricted the blessings of the monarchy to adherence and faithfulness to His commands:

“Be sure to fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. Yet if you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will be swept away” (1 Sa 12:24,25).

From eternity God was the King of the Chosen People. Although Israel’s earthly king came into being because the people were straying away from their Lord as their true King, God had an earthly king in His plans in order to save, not only the covenant people, but the whole world. Already about 800 years before Saul became the first Jewish king, the patriarch Jacob prophesied concerning Judah: “The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his. He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch; he will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes” (Ge 49:10,11).

Before any king existed in Israel, when Samuel still was a little boy, his mother Hannah prophesied concerning Messiah: “He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed” (1 Sa 2:10).⁴

God confirmed that the king of Israel was his own by anointing (1 Sa 10:1). The Lord’s King, who was to come with salvation for Israel and the world, was to be called “the anointed.” In Hebrew that is Messiah and in Greek Christ.

God told David: “When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sa 7:12,13).

Likewise we read in Micah 5:2-4: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.”

And Jer 23:5,6: “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.’”

In this way God summarizes and perfects salvation history. God who is the king of His people from eternity will be reinstated as their King. This will be accomplished through a King who is their own according to flesh and yet their true divine King, God and man incarnate.

We have seen that in the theocracy of OT Israel the Triune God was king long before His people established the external kingship. We have also seen that God the Son fulfilled the promise of a perfect King through his incarnation and saving work.

Before we analyze how Christ’s kingship is structured, let us state that there is a distinction between his rule of power and his Kingdom. Schaller notes: “It must be observed that *basileia* is never used as a designation of the group of created persons or things affected by the dominion.”⁵

Thus the power of Christ or God is not identical or synonymous with the extent of His Kingdom. The fact that God is King, governing the whole earth and the universe, does not mean that all the inhabitants of the earth are members of His Kingdom. Even an earthly king might exercise power beyond the borders of his own kingdom and its people. In the same way God is the king of the universe, but only those who are counted as his flock are subjects in His Kingdom.

It is important to distinguish between Christ’s Kingdom of Power, His Kingdom of Grace, and His Kingdom of Glory.”⁶ It is also important to notice the areas where one could see a unity between the kingdoms and points of connections.

Christ’s Kingdom of Power denotes the concept of Christ as the ruler of heaven and earth; His Kingdom of Grace denotes His rule over the Church, and His Kingdom of Glory means that He rules with unveiled majesty and glory in heaven.

In his Kingdom of Power Christ rules with omnipotence. In His Kingdom of Grace He rules through the Gospel in Word and sacrament.⁷ Even though it is important to make distinctions between the different ways the divine King rules, it is also important to stress the unity of kingship. Pieper says: “Christ rules in the Kingdom of Grace and the Kingdom of Glory with the same omnipotence with which He rules the Church and Heaven.”⁸

Even though the grace which changes our hearts through the gospel of Christ is not an irresistible grace,⁹ but a grace that can be resisted (Matt. 23:37), it is the same omnipotent power which created the universe. This fact is a comfort to afflicted children of God when they are reminded that the same power which raises the sun will gather the elected to the Kingdom of Christ.

“God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

Christ’s Kingdom of Power

Before his incarnation the Son of God is the almighty King who created the universe.

“For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him” (Col. 1:16).

“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3).

Christ inherits this omnipotence as the true eternal God and exercises it together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. His power does not only include those who are His own children. Nor does it merely include the impersonal powers of nature, all that moves on earth, in the air and in the sea (Ps 8:7,8). It includes also the enemies of His Church (Ps 110:2), yes even hell (Php 2:10).

When Scripture tells us that omnipotence is given to Christ, it always is speaking about Him after His incarnation. Christ as true man is almighty due to hypostatic union; the personal union with the logos". "He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (Da 7:14). Christ says: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Mt 28:18).

The exaltation of human nature on the throne of divine power fulfils the promise of God to his people. Although God admonishes Samuel because of the people's dethroning Him as the King of people, He uses their failure to install the eternal Son on the throne of David. The Son of God could only inherit the throne legally by incarnation in human flesh through the birth line of Judah, Jesse and David.

The omnipotence of Christ is not restricted through the incarnation nor increased through His glorification. As true God He is always the Almighty and Omnipresent One. Since the incarnation He is a God-man with omnipotent power.

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever" (Isa 9:6,7).

"Jesus said to them, 'My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working'" (Jn 5:17).

Thus the humiliation of Christ through incarnation does not empty His omnipotence. The humiliation means He freely refrains from the constant use of His divine attributes. "Christ Jesus . . . being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Php 2:6,7).

Without Christ permitting it, His own enemies could not touch Him. It is the omnipotent King Himself who gives His own executors the power to act. To Pilate He says: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above" (Jn 19:11).

Popular theology describes God as a powerless god leaving the world to its own destiny while he watches in compassion, but at a distance. Biblical theology holds to the biblical teaching that Christ has been "seated . . . far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (Eph 1:21-23).

"You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas" (Ps 8:7,8 cf. 1 Co 15:27).

Pieper: "He rules all things moving on earth, in the air, and in the sea (Ps 8:7,8). He rules over his enemies (Ps 110:2). Scripture exempts no territory in the universe from the dominion of Christ; the officium Christi regium extends over all relations and situations in the universe."¹⁰

Men who are enslaved by reason and unbelief experience this doctrine as an obstacle and offence. They attempt with the "theodice problem" as their weapon to discard the Christian view of the almighty ruling King Christ, Christus Pantocrator.

God's own children have by the gospel caught a glimpse of God's love in the face of Christ, the revealed God.¹¹ Although they are those who do not search the hidden councils of God,¹² they find great comfort in knowing that the God who loves them also works for their best with His almighty power (Ro 8:28).

Even though Christ is the hidden power behind divine providence, one must stress one important difference between His Kingdom of Power in time and His Kingdom of Glory in eternity. In His Kingdom of power He allows the existence of evil. In the Kingdom of Glory the last enemy has been defeated, and the presence of the Triune God illuminates the whole world. God "'put everything under his feet.' In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him" (Heb 2:8).

In heaven God no longer uses evil and pain as tools for chastening His people. In heaven “No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever” (Rev 22:3-5).

Christ makes use also of the Kingdom of Power to gather and preserve the Church in this world.¹³ When Christ sends His followers to make “disciples of all nations,” He reminds them of His Kingdom of Power: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore . . .” (Mt 28:18,19).

The almighty power of Christ will accompany His followers while they accomplish the mission He has given them. “The purpose (finis ultimus) of Christ’s dominion is the glory of God, inasmuch as he controls all happenings in such manner as to realize the ultimate purpose of God.”¹⁴

Even the evil that afflicts, hurts and threatens God’s own children works “together for good” (Ro 8:28). God’s goal for His children is that they shall grow in sanctification. The suffering which comes to them serves to their chastening (Heb 12:5-14).

Christ’s Kingdom of Grace

When Christ and His apostles proclaim the Kingdom, they are not speaking of His omnipotent rule over the visible and invisible universe.

Pilate had the common view of a kingship limited with geographical borders, external power and militant servants fighting with temporal weapons. “Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.’ ‘You are a king, then!’ said Pilate. Jesus answered, ‘You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth’” (Jn 18:36,37).

Scripture says: “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Ro 14:17).

Christ’s Kingdom is not something in the future. It is present everywhere faith receives the complete atonement of Christ. “He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13,14).

Christ’s Kingdom was present during His earthly ministry everywhere He himself was present physically. Christ could say to the Pharisees: “The kingdom of God is among you” (Lk 17:21, NJB) because he was present among them, before their very eyes. When Christ casts out demons, His own enemies must conclude that the Kingdom had come, surely not in their hearts, but very visible in His own person (Mt 12:24-28). Hence the apostolic message to the people of Israel is: “The kingdom is at hand” (Mk 1:15, Lk 10:11, RSV). The gospel of Jesus Christ (Ac 5:42, 11:20, Ro 1:4,15:19, 2 Co 2:12, 10:14, 1 Th 3:2, 2 Th 1:8), the gospel of the grace of God (Ac 20:24), of His Son (Ro 1:3,9) is therefore synonymous with the gospel of the Kingdom which Christ Himself proclaimed (Mt 4:23, 9:35, 4:43, Lk 8:1) and sent His apostles to proclaim (Mt 24:14, Lk 9:2, Ac 8:12, 19:8, 28:31).

To believe in the gospel of Christ, that He carried our sins on the cross, that He was punished for them, that we are clothed in His righteousness, means to have entered the Kingdom of Christ (Mt 21:31, Mk 10:15, Lk 16:16, Col 1:23, 1 Th 2:12).

Unless one is born again one cannot enter or inherit the Kingdom of God (Jn 3:5, 1 Co 6:4). Those who are united with Christ through the Word (1 Pe 1:23) and baptism (Jn 3:5) enter the Kingdom of God.

The only weapon, means or tool of the Kingdom of Christ is the gospel in Word and sacraments.¹⁵ “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom” (Mt 13:37,38).

This is also why Christ explains to Pilate the nature of His Kingdom: “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (Jn 18:37).

The Kingdom of Grace is established through faith in the testimony of truth. This is the work of grace in the believing heart. Because the Kingdom comes through faith, it is invisible in essence (2 Ti 2:19).¹⁶

Because the Kingdom of Grace consists in faith in Christ and faith is kindled and nurtured in the hearts of men through the gospel (Ro 1:16,17, Eph 2:8,9, Jn 8:31, 15:1-7, Col 1:21-23), it is impossible to establish or nurture the Kingdom of Grace through the preaching of the law. Law and gospel are opposites and wherever law is allowed to rule in the domain of conscience, the Kingdom of Christ will perish (Ro 3:20, 4:13-16, 10:4, Gal 2:16-21, 3:11-14, 21-25, 5:4, Php 3:8,9). Although the Kingdom of God is characterized by “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17), these fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-25) do not flow from the preaching of the law, which only causes death (2 Co 3:6). The fruits of the Spirit flow from the preaching of the gospel—the proclamation of free grace won by the vicarious atonement of our crucified Savior (Jn 15:5, 1 Jn 4:19).

Because of the preceding we can conclude that the Kingdom of Grace is never established by force or sustained by force, political actions or moralism. The King of the Kingdom of Grace is our crucified and risen Savior whose scepter is the gospel in Word and sacrament. We can also conclude that since the Kingdom of Grace is a rule of grace in the hearts of the believers, it is impossible to identify it with a specific church organization or the sum total of church organizations. It can neither be located by the episcopacy or tradition. The Kingdom of Christ is active and ruling wherever Christ rules as King in the hearts of the believers, through faith and by the means of grace. The Kingdom of Grace rules wherever a contrite heart trusts in the vicarious atonement of Christ.

Luther explains the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “The Kingdom comes . . . when the heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit so that by his grace we may believe his holy Word and live a godly life, both in time and hereafter forever.”

Membership in the Kingdom of Grace is therefore not synonymous with membership in a denomination, nor is it won by obedience to the law nor through the intellectual understanding of doctrine (Mk 10:14,15). It consists in trusting Christ as our crucified Savior—a faith sown into our hearts by the seed, the gospel in Word and Sacraments.

The Kingdom of Grace will last until the end of this world (Mt 28:19, 20). It has the promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Mt 16:18).

When Christ returns, the Kingdom of Grace will end. The existence in the Kingdom of Glory does not consist in believing but seeing. Schaller: “The Kingdom of Grace, with the possibility of salvation for mankind, will come to an end on the last day, which faith is turned into glorious vision.”¹⁷

Christ’s Kingdom of Glory

When we talk about three Kingdoms of Christ, it is important to remember that these definitions are created to make it easier for human reason to understand and to clarify certain necessary distinctions. In reality, there is one Kingdom and one kingship expressing itself in different ways to man, namely in the temporal world, in the realm of salvation, and in the state of eternal heavenly bliss.

Christ’s Kingdom of Glory is a great comfort to the children of God during suffering and tribulation. The Church has no right to demand a better destiny than her King. “It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household?” (Mt 10:25, KJV).

But the Church is also reminded that as her King has been exalted and glorified, she also will be glorified and enjoy indescribable bliss. Paul says: “The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom” (1 Ti 4:18).

The Kingdom of Grace is enjoyed through faith. It takes hold of God’s promise, the assurance of salvation through Christ. The Kingdom of Glory is when Christ turns our believing into seeing. In that moment no veil will cover our eyes. “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face” (1 Co 13:12).

“Now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 Jn 3:2). Let us remind each other that when Christ arrives the Church Militant will be turned into the Church Triumphant, the Kingdom of Grace will be a Kingdom of Glory. “Those he justified, he also glorified” (Ro 8:30).

Amen.