The *SBJT* Forum

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Barry Joslin, C. Everett Berry, and Denny Burk have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

***SBJT*: What are the most common errors that people make when it comes to understanding and proclaiming the kingdom?**

D. A. Carson: I shall list a handful. They are in no particular order of importance, primarily because several of these interpretive errors belong to distinctive groups. To rank the importance of the error would require ranking the influence of each group—and that, of course, is an entirely different question. But several of these errors have something in common: they are errors because they succumb to reductionism. They rightly see some corner of the truth, but then absolutize it in such a way that they fail to see how "kingdom" is, linguistically speaking, a tensive symbol, with a very broad array of referents and overtones in the Bible. To absolutize only a part of the evidence not only makes exegetical nonsense out of other passages and thus skews the comprehensiveness of the ways in which the Bible speaks of the kingdom of God (and related expressions), but it ends up with distorted theological synthesis.

First, some forms of theology inject a temporal barrier between "kingdom" and "church": the church belongs to this dispensation, and the kingdom to the next. At least some passages cannot easily be squared with such an outlook: e.g., "For 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 sin" (Col 1:13–14).

Second, sometimes the inverse error is promoted. The old hymn by Timothy Dwight promotes the view that "kingdom" and "church" refer to the same thing:

> I love Thy kingdom, Lord,
> The house of Thine abode,
> The church our blest Redeemer saved
> With His own precious blood.

But this is a *category* mistake. The word "church" refers to a gathering, an assembly, of people; the word "kingdom," in the first instance, refers to the dynamic notion of "reign" (whatever the more precise meanings it carries as it interacts with particular contexts). Even if there is some sense in which God rules over his church in a different way than he rules over everyone else—and we shall see that that is the case—the two words "church" and "kingdom" belong to different categories and should not be treated as synonyms. Sometimes this mistake is made by people who argue that we ought to *expect* the church to be made up of believers and unbelievers alike, and who

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attempt to defend the point by appealing to the parable of the wheat and the weeds (Matt 24:13–29, 36–43). But Jesus explicitly tells us that this is a parable of the *kingdom*. And, as we shall see, it is a parable designed, in part, to establish a certain stance on the present and the future, not to give us a profile of the church.

Indeed, that is the *third* arena where errors about the kingdom are not uncommon: tensions between the biblical descriptions of inaugurated eschatology (the kingdom has come) and futurist eschatology (the kingdom comes at the end). On the one hand, Jesus tells certain parables of the kingdom in order to get across that the expected "big bang" is not yet. For instance (if I may use the formula much loved by the rabbis when they told their parables, and used by Jesus himself), it is the case with the kingdom as with the soils: there is varying receptivity to the word that is sown, and varying degrees of fruitfulness. The kingdom did not come in instantaneous and utterly effective division. It came slowly, with varying responses. Elsewhere we are told that this side of Jesus' resurrection and exaltation, *all* authority in heaven and on earth is his: in other words, Jesus Christ reigns, even though we do not see everything and everyone cheerfully submitted to him. To use the language of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus must reign until he has destroyed all his enemies, the last of those enemies being death itself. So all of the Father's royal authority is now mediated through Christ: he reigns, even though his reign must be contested until the last enemy is destroyed. All of these images and passages (and there are many more) conjure up a picture of a kingdom already here, already operating, already inaugurated, still contested. On the other hand, the seer John foresees a time when "[t]he kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Rev 11:15), when the hosts of darkness face crushing defeat (Rev 19:11-21); Paul announces a time when every knee will bow (Phil 2:10–11). Many passages picture believers "inheriting" the kingdom at the end.

There are pastoral implications to this running tension between the "already"-reigning kingdom and the "not yet" kingdom. It has been plausibly argued that Corinthian believers were tempted by an over-realized eschatology: already they think of themselves as kings beginning their reign (1 Cor 4:8), and thus they have overlooked the call to suffer exemplified by the apostles themselves. By contrast, it appears that some Thessalonians, insufficiently grateful for the gospel blessings they had already received, and eagerly anticipating the coming of the future kingdom which they thought to be right around the corner, could stint on mundane responsibilities, don ascension robes, sit on a hill in California and sing advent songs. There are negative repercussions to getting the balance of Scripture wrong.

A *fourth* arena of reductionism is found where Christians overlook the fact that in some passages "kingdom" is a sweeping category that leaves nothing out from the arch of its reign—nothing in heaven or on earth, no human being redeemed or otherwise—while in other passages the "kingdom" is that subset of God's sweeping, providential sovereignty under which there is forgiveness with God and eternal life. Not everyone falls under this latter "reign" or "kingdom."

It is easy enough to recall texts on both sides of this pair. On the one hand,

"The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all" (Psa 103:19). In the parable of the wheat and the weeds, to which I've already referred, it is the *kingdom* that is likened to this situation, a situation of mixed wheat and weeds until the end when a final separation takes place. When "kingdom" has so broad an embrace, we must conclude that *everyone* is in the "kingdom" in that sense of "kingdom"; all of us are wheat or weeds. It is equivalent to saying that all of us live under God's reign whether we like it or not; all of us live under his reigning providence; it is simply unavoidable. On the other hand, elsewhere Jesus can teach that unless people are born again they cannot see or enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5). Clearly "kingdom" in this context is more restrictive: some people are in it, and some people are not. To focus entirely on the former sometimes engenders conclusions made up of equal parts of truth and of mushy sentiment: "All human beings are children of God, all are in his kingdom." Well, yes, in exactly the same way that Pol Pot, Adolf Hitler, and Joe Stalin remained, all their lives, under the unavoidable aegis of God's sovereign sway, but this will not strike thoughtful people as an adequate basis for establishing discernment or for fostering utopian inclusivism. On the other hand, to focus entirely on the kingdom as presented in John 3 may regrettably lead some so to focus on the circle of the regenerated that they overlook the sweeping ways in which God's reign, however mediated by secondary causalities, is truly over all.

Increasingly during the last couple of decades, two vociferous groups focus on a *fifth* emphasis which, if it were well-integrated with everything else the Bible says about the kingdom, would not be problematic, but which, when it is taken almost on its own, makes "kingdom" an adjective that blesses whatever I want blessed. Thus we hear a lot today of "kingdom ethics": the actual content can come from that part of the Reformed camp that speaks fluently of redeeming the culture, or from that part of the Anabaptist/Hauerwas/Emergent camp that nods repeatedly and appreciatively at either pacifism or 1920s liberalism, or both. Neither camp is entirely wrong: certainly to live under the saving reign of God entails the transformation of life, including the transformation of ethical life. Yet the ease with which *other* biblical emphases regarding the kingdom are lost is disconcerting. In the present climate I'm suspicious of anyone who uses "kingdom" only as an adjective, for usually it is merely a theologically posh way of approving one's current theological and ethical agenda. If we like some ethical course, we label it "kingdom ethics" and bless it with a text, and epistemology is satisfied.

A particularly virulent form of this approach is hidden behind what Tony Campolo now approvingly calls "red letter Christians." These red letter Christians, he says, hold the same theological commitments as do other evangelicals, but they take the words of Jesus especially seriously (they devote themselves to the "red letters" of some foolishly printed Bibles) and end up being more concerned than are other Christians for the poor, the hungry, and those at war. Oh, rubbish: this is merely one more futile exercise in trying to find a "canon within the canon" to bless my preferred brand of theology. That's the first of two serious mistakes commonly practiced by these red letter Christians. The other is worse: their actual grasp of what the red letter words of Jesus

are actually saying *in context* far too frequently leaves a great deal to be desired; more particularly, to read the *words* of Jesus and emphasize them *apart from the narrative framework of each of the canonical gospels, in which the plot-line takes the reader to Jesus' redeeming death and resurrection*, not only has the result of down-playing Jesus' death and resurrection, but regularly fails to see how the red-letter words of Jesus point to and unpack the significance of his impending crosswork. In other words, it is not only Paul who says that Jesus' cross and resurrection constitute matters "of first importance" (1 Cor 15:3), and not only Paul who was resolved to know nothing among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:1–5), but the shape of the narrative *in each canonical gospel* says the same thing. In each case the narrative rushes toward the cross and resurrection; the cross and resurrection are the climax. So to interpret the narrative, including the red-letter words of Jesus, apart from the climax to which they are rushing, is necessarily a distortion of the canonical Gospels themselves.

Some of the Gospel passion accounts make this particularly clear. In Matthew, for example, Jesus is repeatedly mocked as "the king of the Jews" (27:27–31, 37, 42). But Matthew knows that his readers have been told from the beginning of his book (even the bits without red letters) that Jesus *is* the king: the first chapter establishes the point, and tells us that, as the promised Davidic king, he is given the name "YHWH saves" ("Jesus") because he comes to save his people from their sins. Small wonder for its first three centuries the church meditated often on the irony of Jesus "reigning" from a cross, that barbaric Roman instrument of torture and shame. And it is Matthew who reminds us that, this side of the cross, this side of the resurrection, *all* authority belongs to Jesus (28:18–20). These constitute parts of the narrative framework without which Jesus' red-letter words, not least his portrayals of the kingdom, cannot be rightly understood.

In short: serious Christians will want to avoid reductionism. We must carefully study the sweep of "kingdom" uses, pay close attention to the immediate context, and faithfully emphasize what all of Scripture declares to be matters "of first importance."