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**Proclaiming the Kingship of Jesus**  
How Pastors Proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom  
in a Culture Awash in Pluralism

By  
Jonathan E. Whitley

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2023

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Graduation Date      May 12, 2023

Dr. Russell St. John  
Faculty Advisor

---

Dr. Robbie Griggs  
Second Reader

---

Dr. Joel D. Hathaway  
Director of DMin Program

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. Several challenges and pressures confront pastors who proclaim the gospel of the kingdom. Christians are confused about the kingdom of God, about the relationship of the church to the kingdom of God, and about what it means that the kingdom of God is “at hand.” Additionally, pastors face pressures when preaching the gospel of the kingdom in a culture awash in pluralism.

This study employed a basic qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews with seven senior pastors who has at least ten years of full-time preaching experience and had preached through the Gospels of Matthew or Mark, or on the topic of the kingdom of God. The interviews focused on gaining data with four research questions: 1) how do pastors describe the kingdom of God is at hand when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies, 2) what challenges do pastors face when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies, 3) what strategies do pastors use when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies, and 4) what outcomes do pastors desire when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?

The literature review focused on three key areas to gain a broader understanding proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand in a pluralistic society: the meaning of Jesus’s proclamation in Mark 1:15, the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God,

and the practices of preachers who proclaim the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society.

This study concluded that greater clarity is needed for pastors who proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand in pluralistic societies. To provide this clarity, this study identified several key components and practices for pastors, including, defining the kingdom of God in the abstract, regularly preaching the kingship of Jesus, humbly addressing kingdom misunderstandings, helping people imagine the kingdom, remembering repentance, and desperate dependence on the Holy Spirit.

To pastors who proclaim the gospel of the kingdom

And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

—Daniel 7:14

And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

—Matthew 24:14

And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”

—Revelation 5:9-10

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To my children Ross, Graham, and Hope, thank you for your patience while I missed many Saturdays at home and worked long hours on this work. I would also like to acknowledge my second son Clayton Jonathan. I began this program four months before our King called him from this world at the age of three. The gospel of the kingship of Jesus gives me great hope that one day we will meet again.

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short: I love you and am so thankful for you. Thank you for being my biggest fan through this all.

Above all, may all the glory and honor go to my King and Savior Jesus Christ to whom I cried out for help on numerous occasions. Thank you for giving me strength to continue in this work. I pray that I have honored your name and kingship. Come quickly, King Jesus.

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## Abbreviations

ENDT	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , 3 Vols., ed. H. Balz and G. Schneider
NIDNTT	<i>The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> , 4 Vols., ed. Colin Brown
PCA	Presbyterian Church in America
WCF	<i>Westminster Confession of Faith</i>

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

“A central duty of the Christian church is that of preaching the kingdom,” says Pastor Doug Wilson, author of *Heaven Misplaced: Christ’s Kingdom on Earth*. “The kingdom of God is simply an immense subject—as great as the love of God, as great as the gospel,” he suggests.<sup>1</sup> If gospel preaching is to be biblical, argues Wilson, “it must contain that eschatological element” of the kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Pastor, professor, and author Kevin DeYoung says something similar, stating, “We can’t tell the story of the Bible in all its fullness without talking about the kingdom.” DeYoung notes, “Not only does Jesus make the kingdom a central theme in his teaching, but we also see the importance of the kingdom in Acts and Paul.”<sup>3</sup> Pastors Wilson and DeYoung are convinced that the kingdom should be a “central theme in” and “central duty of” a pastor’s preaching. However, Wilson suggests that not many pastors are doing so, asking, “But how often do modern Christian evangelists preach the *kingdom*?”<sup>4</sup> One wonders if pastors are reticent to preach the kingdom because many Christians are confused about what it is.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced: Christ’s Kingdom on Earth* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2008), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Wilson, “Thy Kingdom Come,” *Blog & Mablog* (blog), June 29, 2005, <https://dougwils.com/the-church/s8-expository/thy-kingdom-come.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin DeYoung, “What Kingdom Story Are We Telling?,” *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), August 9, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/what-kingdom-story-are-we-telling/>.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, “Thy Kingdom Come.”

## “Kingdom” Confusion

Christians are confused about the kingdom of God. J. Mark Beach, Professor of Ministerial and Doctrinal Studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, writes, “Even though this theme is rather prominent in the Bible, the church has never quite reached agreement about what it is, when it comes, or how it is expressed.”<sup>5</sup> Some scholars wonder if part of the problem is the language itself. DeYoung observes that although many may be familiar with the term, “Many Christians would struggle to articulate an accurate definition of [the kingdom].”<sup>6</sup> Steven Baugh, Professor of New Testament at Westminster Seminary California, agrees, stating, “It is remarkable how abstract the kingdom of God can seem to people at times, which makes it appear difficult to define and to understand.”<sup>7</sup> New Testament scholar R.T. France suggests that this confusion is connected to the modern language about the kingdom. He writes, “Language about ‘the kingdom’ is something of a rubber nose, capable of being twisted in any direction to suit the interests of the one who uses it. And that means that it offers fruitful ground for confusion and misunderstanding.”<sup>8</sup> He observes that Christian understanding of the kingdom of God “is not so uniform.” He writes, “For some the phrase points to a desired socio-economic reform; for others to a distinctively charismatic style of discipleship; for

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<sup>5</sup> J. Mark Beach, “The Kingdom of God: A Brief Exposition of Its Meaning and Implications,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 23 (2012): 68.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin DeYoung, “Thinking About the Kingdom,” *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), October 7, 2009, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/thinking-about-kingdom/>.

<sup>7</sup> S. M. Baugh, *The Majesty on High: Introduction to the Kingdom of God in the New Testament* (San Bernardino, CA: Steven Baugh, 2017), 2.

<sup>8</sup> R.T. France, *Divine Government: God’s Kingship in the Gospel of Mark* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 1990), 2.

others it points in an other-worldly direction.”<sup>9</sup> DeYoung agrees, stating, “Much of our language about the kingdom is a bit off.” For example, he says, “We often speak of ‘building the kingdom,’ ‘ushering the kingdom,’ ‘establishing the kingdom,’ or ‘helping the kingdom grow.’” But he counters, “Is this really the way the New Testament talks about the kingdom?”<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, Christians are confused about the number of kingdoms. W. Robert Godfrey, Professor Emeritus of Church History at Westminster Seminary, California, illustrates this confusion, stating, “Christians have spoken about one kingdom, two kingdoms, and many kingdoms of Christ.”<sup>11</sup> For some Reformed Christians, the question is “One Kingdom or Two?,” as the title of Professor Cornelis Venema’s article highlights.<sup>12</sup> For them, this confusion parallels an ongoing debate of the role of the church in society. Professor John Wind states, “The debate within Reformed circles between a ‘two kingdoms’ view and a neo-Calvinist or ‘one kingdom’ view is one recent expression of the ongoing debate over the relationship between Christianity and culture.”<sup>13</sup> What makes the one kingdom-two kingdom debate particularly confusing is that both viewpoints claim to be grounded on the Bible and the Reformed tradition as represented by thinkers such as Abraham Kuyper and John Calvin. For example,

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<sup>9</sup> France, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin DeYoung, “Does the Kingdom Grow?,” The Gospel Coalition, February 15, 2011, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/does-the-kingdom-grow/>.

<sup>11</sup> W. Robert Godfrey, “Kingdom and Kingdoms,” November 1, 2008, <https://wscal.edu/resource-center/kingdom-and-kingdoms>.

<sup>12</sup> Cornelis Venema, “One Kingdom or Two? An Evaluation of the ‘Two Kingdoms’ Doctrine As An Alternative to Neo-Calvinism,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 23 (2012): 77–129.

<sup>13</sup> John Wind, “The Keys to the Two Kingdoms: Covenantal Framework as the Fundamental Divide Between VanDrunen and His Critics,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 77, no. 1 (2015): 15.

Professor David VanDrunen, author of *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, defends his two-kingdom perspective, stating, “That a Two Kingdoms doctrine was part of the Reformed tradition for many centuries cannot be seriously doubted.”<sup>14</sup> However, Professor James K.A. Smith, author of *Awaiting the King*, counters that the neo-Calvinist, one kingdom perspective “grows out of the magisterial Reformation, with a specific focus on a stream flowing out of John Calvin’s Geneva that ‘got in the water,’ so to speak, in the Netherlands and nourished the thought of the theologian and statements Abraham Kuyper.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, as Professor Michael N. Jacobs observes, each viewpoint rejects the other’s “conception of Christ’s reign.”<sup>16</sup> As Professor Ryan McIlhenny, editor of *Kingdoms Apart: Engaging the Two Kingdoms Perspective*, notes, “Intellectuals in the Reformed tradition have spent a considerable amount of time debating the issue, yet they remain divided.”<sup>17</sup>

Related to this, Christians are also confused about the relationship of the church to the kingdom. George Eldon Ladd, Professor of NT Exegesis and Theology, writes, “One of the most difficult questions in the study of the Kingdom of God is its relationship to the church.”<sup>18</sup> In an article entitled, “The Kingdom of God,” Beach asks, “Are church and

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<sup>14</sup> David VanDrunen, “Two Kingdoms and Reformed Christianity: Why Recovering an Old Paradigm Is Historically Sound, Biblically Grounded, and Practically Useful,” *Pro Rege* 40, no. 3 (March 1, 2012): 34.

<sup>15</sup> James K. A. Smith, “The Reformed (Transformationist) View,” in *Five Views on the Church and Politics*, ed. Amy E. Black, Counterpoints: Bible & Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 140.

<sup>16</sup> Michael N Jacobs, “The Resurgence of Two Kingdoms Doctrine: A Survey of the Literature,” *Themelios* 45, no. 2 (August 2020): 314, 328.

<sup>17</sup> Ryan McIlhenny, *Kingdoms Apart: Engaging the Two Kingdoms Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012), xvii.

<sup>18</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 103.



kingdom the same entity?”<sup>19</sup> He observes a variety of responses. While some scholars see a distinction, he notes, “Other scholars have identified the kingdom of God with the institutional church.”<sup>20</sup> For example, Scot McKnight, Professor of New Testament at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, sees “near-identical identities” when comparing the church to the kingdom. He suggests, “When comparing the kingdom to church, most people make fundamental logical errors.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, he concludes, “It is reasonable to say that *the kingdom is the church, and the church is the kingdom.*”<sup>22</sup> However, DeYoung disagrees, stating, “The two are not identical.”<sup>23</sup> DeYoung and co-author Greg Gilbert write, “The kingdom of God is indeed much more than—and different from—the church.”<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, many questions arise when considering the kingdom of God. If the kingdom is “at hand”<sup>25</sup> then why are Christians supposed to pray “your kingdom come”?<sup>26</sup> Does the kingdom grow or expand? Depending on one’s perspective, the answers vary. For example, in answering the question “does the kingdom grow?”

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<sup>19</sup> Beach, “The Kingdom of God,” 68.

<sup>20</sup> Beach, 69.

<sup>21</sup> Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014), 206, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).

<sup>22</sup> McKnight, 206.

<sup>23</sup> Kevin DeYoung, “The Kingdom and The Church: Closer Than You Think,” The Gospel Coalition, March 5, 2010, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/the-kingdom-and-the-church-closer-than-we-think/>.

<sup>24</sup> Kevin DeYoung and Gregory D. Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 126.

<sup>25</sup> Mark 1:15; Matt. 4:17

<sup>26</sup> Matt. 6:10.

DeYoung replies, “It does not expand. It does not increase. It does not grow.”<sup>27</sup> However, Wilson disagrees, stating, “God’s good pleasure is that His kingdom start small and gradually grow to fill the earth.”<sup>28</sup> So which is it?

In summary, Christians are confused about the kingdom of God for a variety of reasons. V.V. Thomas, Professor of Christian History at United Theological College, summarizes, stating:

The kingdom that Jesus envisioned to establish when He came down to this world and what has been perceived throughout the history of the Church, including our contemporary understanding of it, are far apart from each other if not really opposed to one another.<sup>29</sup>

If this is true, is it any wonder that pastors and Christians are confused about the kingdom of God? Could this be why pastors are reticent to proclaim with Jesus, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel?”<sup>30</sup> But there is another challenge pastors who preach the gospel of the kingdom are facing.

### **The Challenge of Pluralism to Proclaiming the Kingdom of God**

“[Pluralism] produces enormous challenges to the preacher of the gospel,” contends D.A. Carson, Distinguished Emeritus Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.<sup>31</sup> Pete Charpentier, Associate Professor of Theology and

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<sup>27</sup> DeYoung, “Does the Kingdom Grow?”

<sup>28</sup> Wilson, “Thy Kingdom Come.”

<sup>29</sup> V V Thomas, “Kingdom of God, Church and Mission: A Historical Perspective,” *Bangalore Theological Forum* 52, no. 2 (December 2020): 251.

<sup>30</sup> Mark 1:15.

<sup>31</sup> Donald A Carson, “The Challenge from Pluralism to the Preaching of the Gospel,” *Criswell Theological Review* 7 (1993): 109.

Pastoral Ministry at Grand Canyon Theological Seminary, agrees, stating, “One of the challenges facing contemporary evangelical preaching is how to defend the gospel to a culture awash in pluralism.”<sup>32</sup> While both Carson and Charpentier acknowledge that “preachers in every age have been and will be challenged” to “faithfully and persuasively” proclaim the gospel in a pluralistic world, they are most concerned about “a form of pluralism known as “prescriptive philosophical pluralism.”<sup>33</sup> Carson explains, “Philosophical pluralism has developed many approaches in support of one stance: viz., any notion that a particular ideological or religious claim is intrinsically superior to another is *necessarily* wrong.” According to this type of pluralism, says Carson, “No religion has the right to pronounce itself right or true, and the others false.” Thus, Carson observes, “The only absolute creed is the creed of pluralism.”<sup>34</sup> Carson argues that the pressures from such philosophical pluralism, tend “to squash any strong opinion that makes exclusive truth claims—all, that is, except the dogmatic opinion that all dogmatic opinions are to be ruled out.”<sup>35</sup> Consequently, Carson and others are concerned about what these pressures of pluralism are doing to the proclamation of the gospel.

According to scholars, the pressures of philosophical pluralism are tempting preachers in several ways. Bryan P. Stone, the E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism at Boston University School of Theology, suggests two temptations that, in the extreme,

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<sup>32</sup> Pete Charpentier, “What Does Evangelical Preaching in a Pluralistic Culture Look Like?: Exploring Homiletical Implications from the Content and Rhetorical Strategies of Paul’s Sermon in Acts 17 for Contemporary Evangelical Preaching,” *Journal for Baptist Theology & Ministry* 18, no. 1 (2021): 95.

<sup>33</sup> Charpentier, 95; Carson, “The Challenge from Pluralism to the Preaching of the Gospel,” 103.

<sup>34</sup> Carson, “The Challenge from Pluralism to the Preaching of the Gospel,” 103.

<sup>35</sup> Carson, 109.

are the opposite of one another. On the one hand, says Stone, some preachers are tempted “to shrink from bold proclamation and to exercise reserve and caution in the things we say, qualifying every claim so as not to offend or cause division.” Such preachers will temper their evangelistic overtures and assertiveness.<sup>36</sup> In the extreme, this temptation leads to “so-called Christian ‘pluralists’” who view all religions as “traveling up the same mountain, albeit along different paths.” In this thinking, observes Stone, “Other religions are not perceived as rivals, nor do their adherents need to be evangelized and converted.”<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, suggests Stone, other preachers are tempted toward “taking a triumphalist and competitive approach to communicating the gospel in contexts of diversity and pluralism.”<sup>38</sup> In the extreme, for these exclusivists who believe that “Christianity is the only way to salvation,” says Stone, “preaching takes on an evangelistic cast, pursued as a competitive practice focused on defending the truth of Christianity, defeating its rivals, and pressing for conversion.”<sup>39</sup> For Stone, such “competitive, market-driven” preaching “simultaneously constricts and negates” the very truth of the gospel.<sup>40</sup>

However, Carson is concerned that the exclusivity of the gospel in a pluralistic society is exactly what is at stake. He says, “The pressures of pluralism have the effect of surreptitiously encouraging us to change the shape of the gospel.” Instead of the gospel

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<sup>36</sup> Bryan P Stone, “Preaching in a Pluralistic World,” *Journal for Preachers* 43, no. 3 (2020): 17.

<sup>37</sup> Stone, 18.

<sup>38</sup> Stone, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Stone, 18–19.

<sup>40</sup> Stone, 20.

being “good news for those who are rebels and alienated from God, telling them about the *one* way by which they may be reconciled to the living God,” Carson warns of situations where “the gospel is repackaged to become the good news that a domesticated deity is available on demand to give hurting people the abundant life.”<sup>41</sup> Philosopher Elmer Thiessen expresses something similar to Carson, stating:

One of the most pressing issues facing evangelicals today is how to call people to repentance and faith in Christ winsomely and unapologetically in a pluralistic world that prefers to talk about tolerance and has a lot of difficulty with any truth claims.<sup>42</sup>

The Reverend Canon Dr. C. Denise Yarbrough, Director of Religious and Spiritual Life at the University of Rochester, illustrates Carson and Thiessen’s concerns. Rather than doubling-down on the exclusivity of the gospel, Yarbrough sees pluralism as an opportunity for preachers to “embrace pluralism in the pulpit.”<sup>43</sup> Yarbrough is an example of Stone’s so-called “Christian pluralist,” contending that the pluralistic society needs the pluralist preacher who “creates a pluralistic and inclusive gospel” that “will lift up the beliefs and practices of other world religious traditions.” Such preaching, she concludes, “is a spiritual imperative in our multi-religious world.”<sup>44</sup> However, Yarbrough’s thinking illustrates a preacher who is not only restrained in a pluralist context but has given into the “pressure” to, as Carson puts it, “change the shape of the

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<sup>41</sup> Carson, “The Challenge from Pluralism to the Preaching of the Gospel,” 103.

<sup>42</sup> Elmer John Thiessen, “The Reconstruction of Evangelism by Liberal Protestants: An Evangelical Response,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 44, no. 4 (November 2020): 368.

<sup>43</sup> C Denise (Claire Denise) Yarbrough, “Interfaith Dialogue in the Pulpit—Proclaiming an Emerging Gospel: A 21st Century Imperative,” *The Journal of Interreligious Studies* 6 (2011): 17.

<sup>44</sup> Yarbrough, 15–19.

gospel.” Thus, preachers who aim to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom of God is at hand in a pluralistic society face tremendous pressures, temptations, and challenges.

### **Purpose Statement**

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how pastors proclaim ‘the kingdom of God is at hand’ to congregations living in pluralistic societies. The study seeks to answer three main questions: 1) what did Jesus mean when he said “the kingdom of God is at hand,” 2) what is the relationship of the church to the kingdom of God, and 3) how do preachers faithfully proclaim the gospel of the kingdom of God in a pluralistic society?

### **Research Questions**

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do pastors describe ‘the kingdom of God is at hand’ when proclaiming ‘the kingdom of God is at hand’ to congregations living in pluralistic societies?
2. What challenges do pastors face when proclaiming ‘the kingdom of God is at hand’ to congregations living in pluralistic societies?
3. What strategies do pastors use when proclaiming ‘the kingdom of God is at hand’ to congregations living in pluralistic societies?
4. What outcomes do pastors desire when proclaiming ‘the kingdom of God is at hand’ to congregations living in pluralistic societies?

## **Significance of the Study**

This study has significance for pastors, congregations, and others who wish to deepen their understanding of the kingdom of God. For pastors, the findings offer greater clarity about how to navigate the challenges of proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. Additionally, the findings offer pastors homiletic and ministry strategies to aid that proclamation. Pastors and congregations will find clarity about the relationship of the church to the kingdom of God, including the implications for the church's role in this present world. Congregations will also be encouraged to hear the hoped-for outcomes of pastors who proclaim the kingdom of God to them.

## **Definition of Terms**

In this study, key terms are defined as follows:

Church – “The fellowship of those who have experienced God’s reign and entered into the enjoyment of its blessings”<sup>45</sup>

Eschatology – “The study of the last things of this age and of things that pertain to the eternal era that immediately follows it, the new creation.”<sup>46</sup>

Gospel – The good news that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life of obedience, suffered, died for the sins of his people, bodily rose from the dead on the third day, and ascended to the heaven, in accordance with the Scriptures.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 117.

<sup>46</sup> Baugh, *The Majesty on High*, 5.

<sup>47</sup> See 1 Cor. 15:3-4; Rev. 5:1-14.

Gospel of the Kingdom – The declaration of the fulfilled and awaited kingship of Jesus together with the means of entering his kingdom.

Great Commission – “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”<sup>48</sup>

Philosophical Pluralism – The notion that no religion or ideology has the right to pronounce itself right or true, and the others false.<sup>49</sup>

Pluralism – The accounts of a pluralistic society to peacefully coexist with one another by forging a life in common; may be expressed descriptively or normatively.

Postmodernism – “An outlook that depends not a little on what are perceived to be the fundamental limitations on the power of interpretation: that is, since interpretation can never be more than *my* interpretation or *our* interpretations, no purely objective stance is possible.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Matt. 28:18-20.

<sup>49</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 19.

<sup>50</sup> Carson, 57.



## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore how pastors proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. To gain a broader understanding of the relevant issues, the literature review begins with an exegesis of Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom of God in Mark 1:15. Then, two relevant areas of literature were reviewed to provide a foundation for the qualitative research. The first area describes the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church. The second area describes how preachers proclaim the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society.

#### **The Kingdom of God is At Hand – An Exegesis of Mark 1:15**

In the opening chapter of his gospel account, Mark writes:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."<sup>51</sup>

R.T. France, NT scholar and commentator, comments, "The story then begins with a ringing public declaration of the purpose of Jesus' mission, and at the center of that declaration is the key phrase 'the kingdom of God.'"<sup>52</sup> DeYoung similarly writes, "In this one sentence we find four of the most important words in the New Testament: kingdom, gospel, repent, and believe." But, says DeYoung, "Although we are familiar with these

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<sup>51</sup> Mark 1:14-15.

<sup>52</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 21.

four terms, many Christians would struggle to articulate an accurate definition of each.”<sup>53</sup> Therefore, exegeting Mark 1:15 and exploring these terms is the subject of this section.

### *Context of Mark 1:15*

Many contemporary scholars agree with the early church tradition that the Gospel of Mark was written by Mark, who based his account on the preaching of the Apostle Peter.<sup>54</sup> Carson and Douglas Moo, NT scholars, describe Mark as the “son of a woman prominent in the early Jerusalem church,”<sup>55</sup> the “cousin of Barnabas,”<sup>56</sup> and the one who “accompanied Paul and Barnabas as far as Pamphylia, in Asia Minor, on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:5, 13).”<sup>57</sup> Written as a historical biography about Jesus,<sup>58</sup> Mark wrote to Gentile Christians in Rome likely in the late 50s or early 60s. Affirming the tradition of the early church, France summarizes: “The tradition of the early church then affirms consistently that this gospel was written by Mark in Rome as a record of

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<sup>53</sup> DeYoung, “Thinking About the Kingdom.”

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 172–77; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans ; Apollos, 2002), 3–6; R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 7–9; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 2, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 7–12.

<sup>55</sup> Acts 12:12.

<sup>56</sup> Col. 4:10.

<sup>57</sup> Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 174.

<sup>58</sup> Carson and Moo, 192; France, *Mark*, 4–6.

Peter's teaching, most probably while Peter was still alive and therefore not later than the early sixties of the first century."<sup>59</sup>

Mark's gospel begins with a brief prologue that sets the scene for the narrative that will follow.<sup>60</sup> After citing the prophets Malachi and Isaiah, Mark highlights the forerunner ministry of John who "appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin."<sup>61</sup> He then briefly recounts the baptism and temptation of Jesus. According to France, the opening prologue of Mark "alerts his readers to the Old Testament hope of the coming of God to save his people," "introduces Jesus of Nazareth in the wilderness, the place of hope and of new beginnings," "associates him closely with the Spirit of God," and "has already identified him as no less than the Son of God."<sup>62</sup> Mark then introduces the ministry and message of Jesus in the next verses, saying, "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'" Scholars agree that these two verses have "foundational significance for Mark's entire narrative of Jesus' ministry."<sup>63</sup> France agrees and sees this proclamation as "the focus of the whole message of Jesus as Mark understands it;" a "pronouncement that could hardly be more clearly highlighted."<sup>64</sup> He

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<sup>59</sup> France, *Mark*, 38.

<sup>60</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 8.

<sup>61</sup> Mark 1:4.

<sup>62</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 26.

<sup>63</sup> Schnabel, *Mark*, 2:50.

<sup>64</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 4, 10.

writes, “Mark’s whole book is about the ‘good news’ of Jesus (1:1), and that good news is summed up in the announcement that the kingdom of God has come.”<sup>65</sup> Edwards agrees, saying that the whole of Jesus’ life and teaching is summarized “in a single concept, ‘the kingdom of God.’”<sup>66</sup> What is the “kingdom of God” that Jesus proclaimed?

### *ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ*

In Mark 1:15, Mark records Jesus proclaiming ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ (*he basileia tou theou*). Herman Ridderbos, Dutch theologian and author of *The Coming of the Kingdom*, comments on the parallel passage in Matthew 4:17, stating, “It was an announcement of an all-inclusive reality in the history of salvation.” He goes on to say, “These words summarized all that had been the object of OT prophecy and of Israel’s expectation of the future from the oldest of times.”<sup>67</sup> Therefore, a proper understanding of ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ must include its OT and rabbinic background.

### **OT and Rabbinic Background**

C.E.B. Cranfield, theologian and commentator, notes that in the teaching of Jesus, the concept ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ “has an OT and Rabbinic background.”<sup>68</sup> However, France suggests that the phrase “is not a phrase which was in common use either in the Old Testament or in the literature of intertestamental Judaism.” For example, “the

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<sup>65</sup> France, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Edwards, *Mark*, 45.

<sup>67</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, ed. Raymond O. Zorn, trans. H. De Jongste, Paideia Press 1978 ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962), 13.

<sup>68</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (London: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 63.

kingdom of God” appears nowhere in the OT, and the phrase “the kingdom of the LORD” appears only twice.<sup>69</sup> Ridderbos agrees. He writes, “There are only a few passages containing the equivalent of *basileia* in the sense of the kingship or the royal dominion of God.”<sup>70</sup> He notes Psalm 103:19; Psalm 145:11,14; and Daniel 3:33.

This relative obscurity leads some to see something unique in Jesus’ use of the phrase. France states, “Jesus’ frequent use of the set phrase, to the extent that it becomes a virtual slogan of his ministry, was a striking innovation.” VanDrunen agrees, stating, “The kingdom that Jesus proclaims was prophesied and anticipated in the OT, but something intrudes into this world such as the world has never seen before.”<sup>71</sup> However, although the specific phrase is absent from the OT, France concedes, “But that does not mean that [Jesus’s] hearers had no background again which to interpret such language.”<sup>72</sup>

In the OT and rabbinic literature, the equivalent word to βασιλεία is *malkuth* (root *mlk*). The NIDNTT notes, “In the LXX the words of this root are very frequent, mostly translations of Hebrew derivatives of the root *mālak*, to be king, to reign.”<sup>73</sup> C.H. Dodd, author of *The Parables of the Kingdom*, notes that βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ “represents an Aramaic phrase well-established in Jewish usage, ‘The *malkuth* of Heaven.’”<sup>74</sup> Scholars agree that *malkuth* is an abstract noun. Dodd notes that *malkuth* “is properly an abstract

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<sup>69</sup> 1 Chron. 28:5; 2 Chron. 13:8.

<sup>70</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 4.

<sup>71</sup> David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 107.

<sup>72</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 16.

<sup>73</sup> Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 373.

<sup>74</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961), 21.

noun, meaning ‘kingship,’ ‘kingly rule,’ ‘reign’ or sovereignty.’ The expression ‘the *malkuth* of God’ connotes the fact that God reigns as king.”<sup>75</sup> Ridderbos agrees, noting that in later Jewish pre-Christian literature, “We almost invariably find the abstract expression *malkuth shamaim*, which in English would be translated “kingdom or kingship of the heavens.”<sup>76</sup> He adds, “The word *shamaim* (heavens) is simply to be considered as a circumlocution of the word ‘God.’”<sup>77</sup>

Scholars see a “twofold distinction” to the concept of the *malkuth* or ‘kingship’ of God in the OT and rabbinic literature: 1) God is ruling (i.e. – a present reality), and 2) God is going to rule (i.e. – a future reality). Cranfield states that in the OT, “even now” God is thought of as being the king of Israel and of the whole world.<sup>78</sup> David Flusser, Israeli Professor of Early Christianity, agrees. He writes, “Among the Jews, the kingdom or rule of God meant that one and only God presently rules *de jure*.”<sup>79</sup> Agreeing with Cranfield and Flusser, Ridderbos adds, “The Old Testament speaks of a general and a particular kind of kingship of the Lord.” The “general” kingship is “the universal power and dominion of God over the whole world and all the nations and is founded in the creation of heaven and earth.” The “particular kind” of kingship is “the special relation between the Lord and Israel” also known as a “theocracy.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Dodd, 21.

<sup>76</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 8.

<sup>77</sup> Ridderbos, 8–9.

<sup>78</sup> Cranfield, *Mark*, 63.

<sup>79</sup> David Flusser, *Jesus* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2001), 106.

<sup>80</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 4.

Second, writes Cranfield, “The divine kingship is referred to in terms of expectation and hope, as something yet to be realized.”<sup>81</sup> France agrees, stating that the concept of ‘the kingship of God’ was “a fundamental belief and hope for the Jews.” He writes:

This hope of the effective establishment of God’s kingship underlies the development of messianic expectation in the Old Testament, and especially the growth of apocalyptic thought and writing, in which it increasingly takes the form of an imminent and catastrophic intervention of God in the affairs of a world gone wrong.<sup>82</sup>

Ridderbos agrees and stresses the relationship between the concept of the kingdom of God and messianic expectation of salvation, saying they “cannot be separated” from one another. Ridderbos writes, “It is the Lord, who will again assert his rule over Israel and maintain his kingship over the whole world in and through the coming Messiah-King.”<sup>83</sup> He also observes in Jewish eschatology a “close connection” between “the expectation of the coming Messiah-King and that of the revelation of the *malkuth shamaim*.” Moreover, says Ridderbos, in later Jewish literature, the kingdom of the Messiah-King is “identical” with the kingdom of God.<sup>84</sup> In summary, writes Ridderbos, “In Jewish eschatological literature, the *malkuth shamaim* is understood to be the coming universal revelation of the kingship of God with which the appearance of the Messiah is intimately connected.”<sup>85</sup> In

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<sup>81</sup> Cranfield, *Mark*, 63–64.

<sup>82</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 17.

<sup>83</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 6.

<sup>84</sup> Ridderbos, 12.

<sup>85</sup> Ridderbos, 13.

fact, says Ridderbos, later Jews used ‘the kingdom of God’ “to denote their expectation of the coming period of salvation.”<sup>86</sup>

### **Defining ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ**

The NIDNTT defines βασιλεία as “kingship, kingly rule, kingdom.”<sup>87</sup> While most English Bibles translate ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ as “the kingdom of God,”<sup>88</sup> many NT scholars define it as the rule, reign, or kingship of God.<sup>89</sup> Thus, it denotes the abstract nature of the concept. France writes, “The word ‘kingdom’ does not convey in modern English what the Hebrew/Aramaic *malkut(a)* and the Greek *basileia* conveyed in their biblical context.”<sup>90</sup> As opposed to ‘kingdom’ in English, which “is today primarily a ‘concrete’ noun, with a clearly identifiable ‘thing’ to which it refers,” France notes that “the biblical nouns are abstract, and refer to the *act* of ruling, the situation of being king.”<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, he states, “βασιλεία is essentially an abstract noun referring to the ‘rule’ or ‘kingship’ of God.”<sup>92</sup> He writes, “‘The kingdom of God’ is God in saving action, God taking control in his world.”<sup>93</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, professor of NT at

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<sup>86</sup> Ridderbos, 18.

<sup>87</sup> Brown, *NIDNTT*, 1986, 2:372.

<sup>88</sup> For example: ESV, KJV, NAS, NIV, NKJ.

<sup>89</sup> Cranfield, *Mark*, 65; Dodd, *Parables*, 56; Edwards, *Mark*, 46; France, *Mark*, 93; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1975), 56; C. S. Mann, ed., *Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed, The Anchor Bible, v. 27 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986), 206.

<sup>90</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 12.

<sup>91</sup> France, 12.

<sup>92</sup> France, *Mark*, 93.

<sup>93</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 15.



Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, agrees with France, saying that the phrase “describes God’s kingship, his rule, his dominion.”<sup>94</sup> Similarly, Dodd states, “It means God exercising His kingly rule among men.”<sup>95</sup> Some scholars include an element of redemption to their definition. Beach writes, “The kingdom of God is his redemptive, restorative, healing, returning-to-fellowship reign—and all this in, through, and because of the person and work of Jesus Christ.”<sup>96</sup> He continues, “The kingdom of God means that God is reigning redemptively and in a sanctifying manner so that life is brought into fellowship with him and in obedience to his will.”<sup>97</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert agree with Beach, defining the kingdom of God as “God’s redemptive reign, in the person of his Son, Jesus Messiah, which has broken into the present evil age and is now visible in the church.”<sup>98</sup> Similar to France’s “abstract” interpretation, they argue that the kingdom of God “is a *dynamic* or *relationship* concept, not a *geographical* one.”<sup>99</sup>

Flusser describes the kingdom of God using similar dynamic language. He states that the kingdom of God is not only God’s kingship but also “the domain of his rule, an expanding realm embracing ever more and more people.” He says, “For Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is not only the eschatological rule of God that has dawned already, but a divinely willed movement that spreads among people throughout the earth.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Schnabel, *Mark*, 2:51.

<sup>95</sup> Dodd, *Parables*, 56.

<sup>96</sup> Beach, “The Kingdom of God,” 54.

<sup>97</sup> Beach, 71–72.

<sup>98</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 127.

<sup>99</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, 119.

<sup>100</sup> Flusser, *Jesus*, 111.

DeYoung and Gilbert clarify this understanding, stating, “The only way the kingdom of God—the redemptive rule of God—is extended is when he brings another sinner to renounce sin and self-righteousness and bow his knee to King Jesus.”<sup>101</sup>

To “appreciate some of the excitement of Jesus’ message,” some scholars suggest employing more “dramatic” language. David Wenham, author and lecturer in NT at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford University, suggests paraphrasing “kingdom of God” with the phrase “revolution of God.” He says, “[Jesus] was announcing a dramatic, forceful change in society to people who—unlike many in our complacent modern world—really longs for such a change.”<sup>102</sup> But as opposed to a political or cultural revolution, Wenham argues, “Jesus had in mind a bigger revolution than that: God’s revolution was to be a total revolution overthrowing Satan and evil and bringing earth and heaven back into harmony.” It would not be a revolution accomplished by force of arms, Wenham suggests, but rather “through suffering and death.” He concludes, “The kingdom which Jesus proclaimed was not just up in heaven; it was more like an invasion of earth by heaven!”<sup>103</sup> France continues, “Jesus *was* preaching revolution.” He writes, “What the Old Testament pointed forward to was ‘God’s revolution,’ and it was that revolution which Jesus was announcing and implementing.” France goes on to say, “The message of Mark 1:15 is not that a change of government is imminent, but that *God* is taking over.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 121.

<sup>102</sup> David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, The Jesus Library (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 22.

<sup>103</sup> Wenham, 22–23.

<sup>104</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 22.

Conversely, Baugh suggests an alternative definition. He states, “The kingdom of God is the new creation.”<sup>105</sup> Similar to other NT scholars, Baugh acknowledges ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ “refers to *both* a domain and to divine royal authority.”<sup>106</sup> However, he makes a distinction between the kingdom of God “proper” and “the effects” or “manifestations” of the kingdom of God. He describes this, stating, “The kingdom of God proper is the fully eschatological new heavens and new earth inhabited by the redeemed, resurrected saints in glory and incorruptibility where the triune God triumphantly rules supreme in the presence of his people forever.”<sup>107</sup> He suggests that many are “tempted to think of the kingdom as it is manifested in this age and to define it accordingly.” He suggests that the “current manifestations” of the kingdom, such as “God’s rule in people’s hearts, the church, the interaction of Christians in the world,” are “properly the effects of the kingdom” only “inaugurated.” Instead, he says, “The kingdom of God proper will only come to full fruition in the future.”<sup>108</sup> VanDrunen agrees with Baugh. He writes, “[The kingdom of God] finds its ultimate fulfillment in the new heaven and new earth and its penultimate fulfillment in the church.”<sup>109</sup> Like Baugh, VanDrunen argues that the church is “the earthly manifestation” of the kingdom of God.<sup>110</sup> Referring to

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<sup>105</sup> Baugh, *The Majesty on High*, 2.

<sup>106</sup> Baugh, 11.

<sup>107</sup> Baugh, 10.

<sup>108</sup> Baugh, 10.

<sup>109</sup> David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms*, 116.

<sup>110</sup> David VanDrunen, 123.

Mark 1:15, Baugh concludes, “We are right to understand Jesus to be saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the *new creation* is at hand.’”<sup>111</sup>

In summary, most scholars define ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ as the “rule,” “reign,” “realm,” or “kingship of God.” Some scholars include language pointing to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Others emphasize the “expanding realm” of the kingdom of God as a “divinely willed movement” or “revolution” that “spreads among people throughout the earth” as they “renounce sin and self-righteousness” and bow the knee to Jesus. Still others restrict the kingdom of God to the final fulfillment of the new creation in the new heavens and new earth.

### **The General Character of the Kingdom of God in the NT**

In the NT, ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ expresses a variety of characteristics. Ridderbos suggests five categories: theocentric, dynamical, messianic, present, and future.<sup>112</sup> First, the kingdom of God is theocentric. Ridderbos describes the theocentric nature of the kingdom of God as “the kingly self-assertion of God” and “of his coming into the world in order to reveal his royal majesty, power and right.” He says “this absolutely theocentric idea” is “the basic motive of all [Jesus’] preaching.”<sup>113</sup> When Jesus proclaims ‘the kingdom of God is at hand,’ Ridderbos suggests, he is making a “theocentric proclamation,” implying that “its coming consists entirely in God’s own action and is

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<sup>111</sup> Baugh, *The Majesty on High*, 138.

<sup>112</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 19.

<sup>113</sup> Ridderbos, 19.

perfectly dependent on his activity.”<sup>114</sup> William L. Lane, NT scholar and commentator, agrees. He writes, “In announcing ‘the kingdom of God,’ the accent falls upon God’s initiative and action.” He adds, “The emphasis falls upon God who *is* doing something and who will do something that radically affects men in their alienation and rebellion against himself.”<sup>115</sup> Similarly, France states, “The noun which determines the meaning of the phrase ‘the kingdom of God’ is not ‘kingdom’ but ‘God.’ It points to *God* in control, *God* working out his purpose.”<sup>116</sup>

Secondly, the kingdom of God has “a strongly dynamic connotation.”<sup>117</sup> Ridderbos suggests that instead of thinking of the kingdom of God as “a spatial or a static entity, which is descending from heaven,” it is better to think “of the divine kingly rule actually and effectively starting its operation.” He concludes, “Therefore, we should think of the Divine *action* of the king.”<sup>118</sup> Cranfield agrees with Ridderbos, stating, “The phrase βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ in the Gospels means not the area or the people over which God reigns, but simply God’s rule, his acting as king.”<sup>119</sup> France agrees with Ridderbos and Cranfield, referring to ‘the kingdom of God’ as “divine government.” He states:

There can be no one place, time, event or community which *is* “the kingdom of God,” any more than the will of God can be tied down to any

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<sup>114</sup> Ridderbos, 23.

<sup>115</sup> William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, vol. 2, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 64.

<sup>116</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 13.

<sup>117</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 24.

<sup>118</sup> Ridderbos, 25.

<sup>119</sup> Cranfield, *Mark*, 65.

specific situation or event. “The kingdom of God” is God in saving action, God taking control in his world.<sup>120</sup>

For example, in the Gospel of Mark, France notes, “The verbs associated with the phrase reveal something of its dynamic connotations.”<sup>121</sup> France makes several observations of these ‘dynamic connotations.’ First, ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ “can be the subject of active verbs.”<sup>122</sup> Second, in the two parables in Mark 4, “it is portrayed in terms of its active force.”<sup>123</sup> Third, the “coming and growth” of the kingdom of God is “independent” of people, meaning that people must “wait eagerly for it” and “welcome it.” Furthermore, France adds, “There is no suggestion that they can achieve it, or even hasten its coming.”<sup>124</sup> Instead, France notes, people “may enter it”<sup>125</sup> or “be close to it,”<sup>126</sup> disciples “may know its secrets,”<sup>127</sup> and “it belongs to little children.”<sup>128</sup> In summary, according to France, these “dynamic connotations” reveal “a breadth of use which defies neat systematization.” Although there is “no obvious ‘thing’ to which the phrase refers,” France notes, “the one thing which is common to them all is *God*.” He adds, “As God the

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<sup>120</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 15.

<sup>121</sup> France, 14.

<sup>122</sup> See Mark 1:15, 9:1.

<sup>123</sup> See Mark 4:27, 32.

<sup>124</sup> See Mark 10:15, 12:34, 15:43.

<sup>125</sup> Mark 9:47; 10:23-25.

<sup>126</sup> Mark 12:34.

<sup>127</sup> Mark 4:11.

<sup>128</sup> Mark 10:14; France, *Divine Government*, 14.

king exercises his authority in his world, and people respond to it, there the 'kingdom of God' will be experienced in many ways."<sup>129</sup>

Thirdly, the kingdom of God is messianic. Ridderbos observes that the Jews in Jesus' day were expecting "a future personality which in a general way may be indicated as the Messiah." Furthermore, says Ridderbos, "The expectation of the Messiah may be said to be one of the most essential associations evoked by the concept of the kingdom of heaven."<sup>130</sup> Therefore, says Ridderbos, "Jesus' preaching of the kingdom is a revelation concerning the Messiah."<sup>131</sup> Schnabel agrees with Ridderbos, observing the messianic nature of the kingdom of God. "God's present kingdom," he says, "is bound up with Jesus' identity as the Messiah and as the unique Son of God."<sup>132</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert agree, stating, "The kingdom belongs to and is ruled by King Jesus."<sup>133</sup>

Scholars see a connection between the Messiah and Jesus' use of the title "the Son of Man."<sup>134</sup> Ridderbos writes, "This Messiahship is especially defined by the term 'the Son of Man,' according to Daniel 7."<sup>135</sup> Ridderbos makes this connection because of the "central place occupied by the 'Son of Man' in the coming of the kingdom." He argues

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<sup>129</sup> France, 15.

<sup>130</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 27–28 Ridderbos also notes that there is "no material difference between the terms 'kingdom of heaven' and 'kingdom of God'" and that "this duality of expression ought to be understood as identical in meaning," 19.

<sup>131</sup> Ridderbos, 30.

<sup>132</sup> Schnabel, *Mark*, 2:52.

<sup>133</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 122.

<sup>134</sup> For example, in the Gospel of Mark, Mark records 14 times when Jesus refers to himself with the title "the Son of Man" (e.g. – Mark 2:10; 9:9; 10:45). Matthew records Jesus' referring to himself as "the Son of Man" 30 times (e.g. – Matt. 8:20; 11:19; 26:24).

<sup>135</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 36.

that the “‘Kingdom of God’ and ‘the Son of Man’ are correlates in Jesus’ preaching,” which “proves that to a great extent Jesus’ preaching is oriented to the prophecy in Daniel 7:13ff.”<sup>136</sup> France agrees with Ridderbos, observing “how strongly the language and ideas of Daniel have influenced the teaching of Jesus about the kingdom of God.”<sup>137</sup> He writes, “The three passages about the future ‘coming of the Son of Man’ in Mark are all clearly based on Daniel 7:13-14.”<sup>138</sup> Summarizing the prophecy of Daniel 7:13ff, Ridderbos writes:

In this prophecy there appears the figure of the “Son of Man” as coming in the clouds of heaven to the “Ancient of days,” and as he to whom was given dominion, and glory, and the kingship that was to comprise all the nations and was to have an eternal and imperishable significance. In this prophesy, as indeed in all Daniel’s visions, the universality and transcendent character of the coming kingdom are very prominent. The ‘Son of Man’ is, consequently, not simply an ordinary man invested with temporal and earthly dominion. But in the great eschatological drama he is the man who has been given unlimited divine authority, and to whom God’s universal royal dominion has been entrusted.<sup>139</sup>

Ridderbos concludes, “Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom of heaven is at the same time the preaching of the Messiah.”<sup>140</sup>

Fourthly and fifthly, the kingdom of God in the NT has both present and future characteristics. Most scholars acknowledge both. Michael Horton, the J. Gresham Machen Professor of Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary California,

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<sup>136</sup> Ridderbos, 31–32.

<sup>137</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 18.

<sup>138</sup> France, 74. Mark 8:38; 13:26; 14:62.

<sup>139</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 32.

<sup>140</sup> Ridderbos, 36.



states, “There is an ‘already’ and ‘not yet’ aspect to the kingdom.”<sup>141</sup> Horton refers to the kingdom of God as a “semi-realized kingdom,” making a distinction between “this age and the age to come.” He writes, “Even now the age to come is breaking in upon this passing age, but not yet in the visible and completed form that will be universally evident at Christ’s appearing.”<sup>142</sup> VanDrunen agrees with Horton, saying that the “two ages--this age and the age to come” are an “important biblical distinction” when talking about the kingdom of God. He writes, “The two-ages doctrine primarily concerns an eschatological distinction and tension between this world and the next.”<sup>143</sup> Beach acknowledges this distinction as well. He describes ‘this age’ as “the world under the regime of darkness and Satan’s tyranny;” and ‘the age to come’ as “the world under the regime of Christ and consummated glory.”<sup>144</sup>

Some scholars use the language of “inauguration” and “consummation” to describe the “already” and “not yet” aspects of the kingdom of God. Beach writes, “The kingdom of God is inaugurated—meaning, it has arrived in part (see Matt. 12:28; 21:31; Rom. 14:17)—but it is yet to reach its pinnacle and consummation (see 1 Cor. 14:17; Luke 12:32).”<sup>145</sup> Like Beach, Baugh “prefers” the language of inauguration and consummation, referring to the kingdom of God as an “inaugurated eschatology.”<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Michael Horton, *The Gospel Commission: Recovering God’s Strategy for Making Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 66.

<sup>142</sup> Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 219.

<sup>143</sup> David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms*, 14.

<sup>144</sup> Beach, “The Kingdom of God,” 67.

<sup>145</sup> Beach, 66.

<sup>146</sup> Baugh, *The Majesty on High*, 5.

However, Baugh cautions against using the ‘already and not yet’ language, arguing that “it can lead to unwanted inaccuracies” and “is subject to misunderstanding and unnecessary imprecision.”<sup>147</sup> He writes, “It is too vague to say that the kingdom of God is already and not yet without a number of qualifications, for it might imply that every aspect of the kingdom is mysteriously both already and not yet in the same way, which is not true.”<sup>148</sup> For example, suggests Baugh, “If we were to say that the citizenship of the kingdom of heaven is ‘already and not yet,’ this is not true.” Looking to Matthew 5:3, 10, Baugh argues that Jesus has “already” conveyed to his people possession of the kingdom. Therefore, he argues, “There is no *not yet* about our possession of kingdom citizenship.” However, Baugh makes a distinction between the “already” possession of citizenship and the “not yet” “consummation *benefits* of this inheritance.”<sup>149</sup>

Some scholars prefer the language of “fulfilled” and “awaited” to describe the present and future aspects of the kingdom of God. Schnabel writes, “The *kingdom of God* is not to be reduced to a single referent, whether a time, place, event or situation: God’s royal government is both fulfilled and awaited, present and future.”<sup>150</sup> France agrees with Schnabel, suggesting:

It is therefore not appropriate to ask whether ‘the kingdom of God’ is past, present, or future, as if it had a specific time-reference like ‘the day of Yahweh. God’s kingship is both eternal and eschatological, both fulfilled and awaited, both present and imminent.’<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Baugh, 5, 139.

<sup>148</sup> Baugh, 139.

<sup>149</sup> Baugh, 139–41.

<sup>150</sup> Schnabel, *Mark*, 2:51.

<sup>151</sup> France, *Mark*, 93.

France explains, “It both ‘has come’ and ‘is coming,’ just as in the longer version of the Lord’s Prayer we can balance ‘Your kingdom come’ with ‘Yours is the kingdom.’”<sup>152</sup>

Similar to France’s “present” language and to Beach and Baugh’s “future” language,

Ridderbos uses the terms “fulfillment” and “consummation.” He writes:

Fulfillment and consummation have the advantage of qualifying the presence of Jesus’ coming and his work as well as the beginning of the great era of salvation, and, besides, they hold out the prospect of the definitive, final significance of the kingdom as something of the future.<sup>153</sup>

In summary, scholars agree that the kingdom of God is generally a present reality that is “inaugurated” or “fulfilled,” and a future reality yet to be “consummated.”

However, scholars are not in agreement as to the specifics of what aspects of the kingdom of God are already “at hand” and what is yet to come.

### *Πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς*

Mark records that Jesus came proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, “πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς” (*peplérotai ho kairòs*). Several English translations interpret the phrase as “the time is fulfilled.”<sup>154</sup> Scholars describe ὁ καιρὸς and πεπλήρωται in a variety of ways.

#### **ὁ καιρὸς**

The NIDNTT defines καιρὸς as “time, especially a point of time, moment,” saying, “With the coming of Jesus, a unique *kairos* has dawned, one by which all other

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<sup>152</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 24–25.

<sup>153</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 56.

<sup>154</sup> For example, see ESV, KJV, NASB.

time is qualified.”<sup>155</sup> Ridderbos expresses something similar when he refers to ὁ καιρὸς as “the great turning-point of history, promised by God himself for the full revelation of his kingly glory; the time for the liberation of his people and the punishment of his enemies.”<sup>156</sup>

Some scholars refer to ὁ καιρὸς as “the critical moment.” Lane comments, “By sovereign decision God makes the point in time the critical one in which all the moments of promise and fulfillment in the past find their significance in one awesome moment.”<sup>157</sup> James R. Edwards, NT scholar and commentator, agrees with Lane. He writes, “The announcement of the kingdom of Jesus’ debut in Galilee is presented by Mark as the definitive moment in history.” Like Lane, Edwards defines καιρὸς as “the critical or opportune moment (as opposed to progressive time).”<sup>158</sup>

Similarly, other scholars refer to ὁ καιρὸς as “the decisive moment.” Schnabel notes that καιρὸς “can mean ‘decisive moment.’”<sup>159</sup> Frances agrees with Schnabel, making a helpful distinction between χρόνος (*chrónos*) and καιρὸς. He states, “The idea is not simply that an allotted time has elapsed (that would have been better expressed by χρόνος, as in Acts 7:23), but that the decisive moment (καιρὸς) has now arrived.”<sup>160</sup> Friar Augustine Mulloor, in his article “Jesus, Time, Kingdom of God,” makes a similar

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<sup>155</sup> Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 833, 837.

<sup>156</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 13.

<sup>157</sup> Lane, *Mark*, 2:64.

<sup>158</sup> Edwards, *Mark*, 47.

<sup>159</sup> Schnabel, *Mark*, 2:51.

<sup>160</sup> France, *Mark*, 91.

distinction. He writes, “The word ‘kairos,’ as distinct from ‘chronos’ by which time is referred to in a general manner, is specific time.” Referring to *καιρὸς*, Mulloor continues, “The word connotes salvation because it refers to a very special moment within the movement which has been determined earlier and has been awaited eagerly.”<sup>161</sup>

Finally, some scholars refer to *ὁ καιρὸς* as an “opportunity.” William Hendriksen, NT scholar and commentator, writes, “*καιρὸς* here views *time* from the aspect of the opportunity it provides, not simply as a change from the past into the present into the future, not mere *duration*.”<sup>162</sup> Cranfield continues, “In ordinary Greek the word denotes the favourable time for a particular undertaking, so ‘opportunity.’” He also describes *καιρὸς* as “a time filled with significance.”<sup>163</sup>

### **πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς**

The verb *πεπλήρωται* is the third person singular passive perfect indicative of the verb *πληρώω*. The NIDNTT defines *πληρόω* (*plerōō*) as “fill, complete, fulfil, accomplish, carry out.”<sup>164</sup> Scholars agree that the phrase refers to the fulfillment of OT prophecies and promises that began “in the time of messianic deliverance.” France comments, “*Plerōō* points precisely to the realization of what was expected or promised.”<sup>165</sup> France suggests that the perfect tense indicates that “this is not an

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<sup>161</sup> A. Mulloor, “Jesus, Time, Kingdom of God : Rethinking the Synoptic Vision,” *Jeevadhara* 29, no. 170 (1999): 124.

<sup>162</sup> Hendriksen, *Mark*, 56.

<sup>163</sup> Cranfield, *Mark*, 125.

<sup>164</sup> Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 733.

<sup>165</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 23.

announcement of something future” but rather an indication that “the state of fulfillment already exists” and so he translates the phrase as “the decisive moment has now arrived.” He describes this moment as “the fulfillment of prophetic hope in the time of messianic deliverance.”<sup>166</sup> Schnabel agrees with France, translating the phrase as “the time of fulfillment has come.” He explains, “The decisive moment of the fulfillment of God’s promises of salvation has arrived with the coming of Jesus the Messiah; and the time of promise, hope and expectation has elapsed and the time of messianic deliverance has arrived.”<sup>167</sup> Lane agrees, saying, “Jesus declares that the critical moment has come: God begins to act in a new and decisive way, bringing his promise of ultimate redemption to the point of fulfillment.”<sup>168</sup>

Some scholars use the imagery of a “threshold” to describe *πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς*. Ridderbos, who interprets the phrase as “the time is fulfilled,” illustrates it “as the indication that the threshold of the great future has been reached; that the door has been opened, and that the prerequisites of the realization of the divine work of consummation are present.” Therefore, he concludes, “The concluding divine drama can start.”<sup>169</sup> Flusser uses similar imagery, stating, “[Jesus] is the only Jew of ancient times known to us who preached not only that people were on the threshold of the end of time but that the new age of salvation had already begun.”<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> France, *Mark*, 91.

<sup>167</sup> Schnabel, *Mark*, 2:51.

<sup>168</sup> Lane, *Mark*, 2:64.

<sup>169</sup> Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, 48.

<sup>170</sup> Flusser, *Jesus*, 110.

Other scholars use the imagery of a “dawn.” Edwards, who interprets the phrase as “the time has come,” describes it as “the dawn of salvation” that “results from God’s providence and timing.” Mulloor states, “[πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς] is the description of the new situation that has dawned.”<sup>171</sup>

In summary, *πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς* refers to the “decisive” or “critical” moment in history when the OT prophecies and promises began to be fulfilled in the first coming of Jesus the Messiah. By declaring “the time is fulfilled,” Jesus is proclaiming that the redemptive promises of God have begun their fulfillment in and through him as he stands on the “threshold” of time in the doorway that opens to the “dawn” of salvation. Furthermore, Jesus’ proclamation ὅτι *πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς* does not stand alone but is immediately followed by *καὶ ἤγγικεν*.

### *Καὶ ἤγγικεν*

*ἤγγικεν* (*ēngiken*) is the third person singular active perfect indicative of the verb *ἐγγίζω* (*ēngízō*). The NIDNTT defines *ἐγγίζω* as “approach, come near.”<sup>172</sup> France defines it as “to come near.” Both the NIDNTT and France see a connection between *ἐγγίζω* and the prophecies of Isaiah 46:13; 51:5; 56:1. The NIDNTT states, “The theological interpretation of the verb *engízō*, to come near, in the Synoptics is linked with Isaiah’s proclamation of salvation.” Furthermore, says the NIDNTT, “The perfect *ēngiken* (the most frequently used tense of *engízō*) thus expressed the end of the time of preparation. God’s kingdom *has* drawn near, i.e., in the proclamation and work of Jesus it

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<sup>171</sup> Mulloor, “Jesus, Time, Kingdom of God,” 124.

<sup>172</sup> Brown, *NIDNTT*, 1986, 2:53.

is already in the present time.”<sup>173</sup> France continues, “Mark’s use of the perfect tense suggests that something more is intended than a statement of imminence.”<sup>174</sup> However, scholars are not in agreement about what that something is.

Although several English Bible translations interpret ἤγγικεν as “is at hand,”<sup>175</sup> interpretations of ἤγγικεν vary, especially among translators of the mid-twentieth century. For example, Reginald H. Fuller, NT scholar and author, describes ἤγγικεν, stating, “While it still asserts that the decisive event, though impending, still lies in the future, it means more than that.” He then says, “The impending event, while most emphatically future, is nevertheless operative in advance.” Such “advance” operation is “the signs of the coming Kingdom, concentrated in the person and activity of Jesus.” However, says Fuller, “The Kingdom of God has not yet come, but it is near.”<sup>176</sup> Conversely, consider Dodd, who translates ἤγγικεν as “has come.” As opposed to Fuller, Dodd states, “Here the Kingdom of God is a fact of present experience.” Dodd argues that ἤγγικεν points to “the ‘arrival’ of the Kingdom.” The kingdom of God “is not merely imminent; it is here.” He grounds his argument, stating, “The sayings which declare the Kingdom of God to have come are explicit and unequivocal. They are moreover the most characteristic and distinctive of the Gospel sayings on the subject.”<sup>177</sup> However, Lane disagrees with

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<sup>173</sup> Brown, 2:54.

<sup>174</sup> France, *Mark*, 92.

<sup>175</sup> For example, see ESV, KJV, NASB. The NIV translates ἤγγικεν as “has come near.”

<sup>176</sup> Reginald H. Fuller, *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus: An Examination of the Presuppositions of New Testament Theology*, vol. 12, Studies in Biblical Theology (Chicago, IL: Alec R. Allenson, Inc, 1954), 25.

<sup>177</sup> Dodd, *Parables*, 29, 33.



Dodd's assertion of the "explicit and unequivocal sayings." He writes, "What Jesus meant when he affirmed the kingdom of God has drawn near is nowhere explicitly defined."<sup>178</sup>

France suggests that historically varied interpretations of Mark 1:15 are directly connected to one's eschatological commitments. He states, "Translations of *engiken* have varied in relation to the individual scholar's commitment either to 'futurist' or to 'realized' eschatology in the teaching of Jesus."<sup>179</sup> A futurist eschatology, often associated with premillennialism, suggests that the kingdom of God will come (in the future) at the Second Coming. Michael J. Vlach, Professor of Theology at The Master's Seminary explains, "Jesus' kingdom is future from our standpoint. The kingdom comes when Jesus comes again."<sup>180</sup> On the other hand, a realized eschatology, often associated with amillennialism and postmillennialism, suggests that the kingdom of God was "realized in or through the ministry of Jesus itself." Mikel Burley, Associate Professor of Religion and Philosophy at the University of Leeds, UK, describes it as:

An interpretation of the New Testament according to which the coming of the kingdom or reign of God is not something that would occur only after the completion of Jesus' ministry; rather, it was brought into reality (*realized, actualized*) during that ministry itself.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Lane, *Mark*, 2:64.

<sup>179</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 23.

<sup>180</sup> Michael J. Vlach, "Premillennialism and the Kingdom: A Rationale for a Future Earthly Kingdom," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 29, no. 2 (2018): 218.

<sup>181</sup> Mikel Burley, "Dislocating the Eschaton?: Appraising Realized Eschatology," *Sophia* 56, no. 3 (September 2017): 436.

Although he reluctantly would vote for a realized eschatology,<sup>182</sup> France believes that requiring an interpretation of Mark 1:15 as either a realized or a futurist eschatology “is to misunderstand the whole thrust of Jesus’ pronouncement,” and “has led to unnecessary polarization in the exegesis of this verse.”<sup>183</sup> Rather, he argues that the whole thrust is tied to interpreting ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ not “as a term with a single specific referent, whether a time, place, event, or situation.” He also sees a direct connection to the previous statement πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς. France suggests, “To declare that God’s kingship has come near is to say that God is now fulfilling his age-long purpose, rather than to point to a specific time or event which can be defined as either already present or still future, but not both.” Therefore, concludes France, “God’s kingship is both eternal and eschatological, both fulfilled and awaited, both present and imminent.”<sup>184</sup> Schnabel agrees, defining ἤγγικεν as “has come near,” which he says, “indicates that Jesus speaks not merely of the coming of God’s kingdom as imminent (but still in the future), but – in the context of the preceding statement that the *kairos* has been fulfilled – as happening in the present.”<sup>185</sup> France and Schnabel’s positions sound similar to what other scholars have termed “inaugurated eschatology.”<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> “If, therefore, I am required to decide whether Mk. 1:15 expresses a ‘realised’ or a ‘futurist’ eschatology, I must vote for the former.” France, *Mark*, 92.

<sup>183</sup> France, 92–93.

<sup>184</sup> France, 93.

<sup>185</sup> Schnabel, *Mark*, 2:51.

<sup>186</sup> France says inaugurated eschatology is “a clear step in the right direction, and convey[s] an important truth for the understanding of the NT, that its authors seem to have no difficulty in holding together the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ in their presentation of God’s saving work,” *Divine Government*, 24.

Moreover, many contemporary Reformed scholars embrace the idea of an “inaugurated eschatology,” or what is also referred to as “the already and not yet” of the kingdom of God. Beach, who embraces this viewpoint, describes the “inaugurated” kingdom of God, stating, “It has arrived in part (see Matt. 12:28; 21:31; Rom. 14:17)—but it is yet to reach its pinnacle and consummation (see 1 Cor. 14:17; Luke 12:32).”<sup>187</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert agree with Beach, describing inaugurated eschatology as “the understanding that the *eschaton*—‘the end’—has been *inaugurated*, or begun.” They write, “The NT declaration about the kingdom of God is that in the person of Jesus the King, the glory of that age to come has broken into and invaded the present age.”<sup>188</sup> Like Beach, DeYoung, and Gilbert, Baugh advocates for an inaugurated eschatology. Defining the kingdom of God as the new creation, Baugh paraphrases Mark 1:15 as “The time is fulfilled, and the *new creation* is at hand.”<sup>189</sup> However, with this understanding Baugh cautions against being tempted “to ignore the vital distinction” between the inauguration and the consummation of the kingdom. On the one hand, he cautions against the error of “over-realized eschatology,” which is to not recognize that “some elements or aspects of the new creation have not yet been consummately realized.” On the other hand, Baugh cautions against the error of “under-realized eschatology,” which “regards the kingdom of God as in no way inaugurated and regards Christ, for example, as seated at God’s right hand but not ruling in any real sense.”<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Beach, “The Kingdom of God,” 66.

<sup>188</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 124.

<sup>189</sup> Baugh, *The Majesty on High*, 138.

<sup>190</sup> Baugh, 138–39.

In summary, ἤγγικεν can be translated “has come near,” “is at hand,” or “has come.” Reformed scholars interpret this with either a realized or inaugurated eschatological viewpoint. Rather than focus on specific times, events, or place, many scholars see a tension between what is at hand in Jesus’ proclamation and what is yet to come. Nevertheless, most agree that in this proclamation the age to come has broken into this present age, the time of the prophets and promises being fulfilled. As France summarizes, “To declare that God’s kingship has come near is to say that God is now fulfilling his age-long purpose.”<sup>191</sup>

*μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ*

Jesus’ proclamation ὅτι πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς καὶ ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ demands a response. Jesus expresses this call when he says, “μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ,” or “repent and believe in the gospel,” as most English Bibles translate it. France states, “With the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, therefore, a new era of fulfillment has begun, and it calls for a response from God’s people.”<sup>192</sup> Schnabel agrees, stating, “The coming of the kingdom of God which is connected with Jesus’ proclamation and with his identity and ministry requires a new orientation.”<sup>193</sup> Similarly, Edwards writes, “The arrival of God’s *kairos* demands a change in thinking.”<sup>194</sup> France continues, “That

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<sup>191</sup> France, *Mark*, 93.

<sup>192</sup> France, 93.

<sup>193</sup> Schnabel, *Mark*, 2:52.

<sup>194</sup> Edwards, *Mark*, 47.

response is summed up in the twin imperatives μετανοείτε καὶ πιστεύετε.”<sup>195</sup> Edwards agrees with France and emphasizes the present tense of the verbs as meaning “they enjoin living in a condition of repentance and belief as opposed to momentary acts.” He suggests, “They lay claim to the total allegiance of believers.”<sup>196</sup>

### **Μετανοείτε**

Μετανοείτε (*metanoείτε*) denotes a radical change in one’s direction. The word is a second person plural, present active imperative verb from μετανοέω (*metanoέω*). The NIDNTT says μετανοέω means to “change one’s mind, repent, be converted.”<sup>197</sup> Hendriksen describes the verb, stating, “The word used in the original looks forward as well as backward. It means ‘be converted,’ undergo a radical change of heart and life, a complete turnabout of life.”<sup>198</sup> France adds that it “clearly expresses” the “demand for a radical new direction.”<sup>199</sup> Lane similarly states, “Jesus accordingly calls men to a radical decision.”<sup>200</sup> Cranfield is more specific, saying that repentance is “a turning away from evil, a turning to God, and involves obedience to God’s laws.”<sup>201</sup>

Lane suggests that the biblical concept of repentance “is deeply rooted in the wilderness tradition.” He writes, “In the earliest stratum of OT prophecy, the summons to

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<sup>195</sup> France, *Mark*, 93.

<sup>196</sup> Edwards, *Mark*, 47.

<sup>197</sup> Brown, *NIDNTT*, 1986, 1:357.

<sup>198</sup> Hendriksen, *Mark*, 58.

<sup>199</sup> France, *Mark*, 93.

<sup>200</sup> Lane, *Mark*, 2:66.

<sup>201</sup> Cranfield, *Mark*, 45.

‘turn’ basically connotes a return to the original relationship with the Lord. This means a return to the beginning of God’s history with his people, a return to the wilderness.”

Furthermore, says Lane, “It is a call to renew sonship in the wilderness.”<sup>202</sup> Pastor Randall L. Kohls agrees with Lane. In his article titled “The Gospel Begins in the Wilderness,” he writes:

The wilderness is the place of Yahweh’s appearing, and not just appearing, but appearing in order to save his people. The wilderness is a place where dangerous lack is answered with divine provision. The wilderness is a place for return, where a right filial relationship with Yahweh will be restored.<sup>203</sup>

He observes that “an integral part of John’s call to repentance” in Mark 1:4 is “a going out into the wilderness, a return to the wilderness in order to identify with and be part of God’s saving action there.”<sup>204</sup> Kohls concludes, “The gospel begins in the wilderness. Deliverance is found in the wilderness. A true relationship with God is found in the wilderness.”<sup>205</sup>

### **Πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ**

When Jesus calls for people to repent, to radically change their direction, this call away from something is coupled with the call toward something else. Jesus summarizes this, saying, πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ (*pisteúete en tō euangeliō*). Πιστεύετε is a second person plural, present active imperative verb from πιστεύω. The NIDNTT says πιστεύω

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<sup>202</sup> Lane, *Mark*, 2:49–50.

<sup>203</sup> Randall L. Kohls, “The Gospel Begins in the Wilderness: An Examination of Mark 1.1-15,” *International Congregational Journal* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 66.

<sup>204</sup> Kohls, 68.

<sup>205</sup> Kohls, 71.

means “to believe.”<sup>206</sup> However, France suggests that πιστεύω “conveys more the sense of trust than of ‘belief’ in the merely intellectual sense.”<sup>207</sup> Similarly, Hendriksen says, “Such believing, or faith, implies knowledge, assent, and confidence.” He further clarifies, stating, “A person accepts a message when he acts upon it.”<sup>208</sup>

The object of Jesus’s call to trust is ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ, in the gospel or “good news.” Cranfield notes that this is “the only clear example of *pisteuein en* in the NT.” He writes, “They are to believe the good news that the hoped for kingdom of God has come near.”<sup>209</sup> France agrees with Cranfield, saying “The construction πιστεύω ἐν does not occur elsewhere in the NT except perhaps in John 3:15.”<sup>210</sup> He concludes, “πιστεύω ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ therefore probably denotes not only an intellectual acceptance that the ‘news’ is true, but a response of acceptance and commitment.”<sup>211</sup>

### **Μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ**

In summary, Jesus’s words “μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ” is a call for a radical change in one’s direction by accepting and committing to another way. Lane suggests that when Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God is at hand, he is not giving content but conveying “a summons” calling men to “a radical decision.” He states, “[Jesus] stands as God’s final word of address to man in man’s last hour. *Either* a man

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<sup>206</sup> Brown, *NIDNTT*, 1986, 1:593.

<sup>207</sup> France, *Mark*, 93.

<sup>208</sup> Hendriksen, *Mark*, 58.

<sup>209</sup> Cranfield, *Mark*, 68.

<sup>210</sup> France, *Mark*, 93.

<sup>211</sup> France, 94.

submits to the summons of God, *or* he chooses this world and its riches and honor.” Lane emphasizes “the note of urgency in the summons” because “the nature of the gospel is clearer than ever before.” He writes, “Provision has been made for men to repent, but there is no time to delay.”<sup>212</sup>

### *Summary of Exegesis of Mark 1:15*

In summary, the literature suggests that in Mark 1:15 when Jesus proclaims “ὅτι πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς καὶ ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ· μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ, he was making “a ringing public declaration,” and the heart of his declaration is the key phrase ‘the kingdom of God.’”<sup>213</sup> The βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ can be described as the new creation of God, God’s redemptive reign, or the kingship of God. Some scholars suggest more dramatic language that describes the revolution of God, referring to the overthrowing of Satan and evil and bringing earth and heaven back into harmony.

When Jesus says ὅτι πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς καὶ ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ, the literature suggests that he is declaring that all the OT prophecies and redemptive promises are being fulfilled in this decisive moment in history when the kingship of God ἤγγικεν. While scholars do not agree about all the specifics of what it means that the reign of God ἤγγικεν, many Reformed scholars conclude that Jesus was at the very least announcing the inauguration of kingdom of God that he established in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. This interpretation implies that the kingdom of God is already at hand but is not yet consummated or perfected. Most scholars agree that the

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<sup>212</sup> Lane, *Mark*, 2:66.

<sup>213</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 21.



kingdom of God is not a place, time, or specific event but an abstract reality that is both eternal and eschatological, both fulfilled and awaited, both present and imminent. France provides a helpful and balanced summary: “The main point of Mark 1:15 is not the precise timescale, but the fact that it is in the coming of Jesus that we are to see God’s revolution taking place. Indeed, it is in Jesus that we are to see God coming as king.”<sup>214</sup>

Finally, the literature suggests that Jesus’ proclamation is a summons that demands an urgent response. It is a call to return to the wilderness of God and be restored, a call for a radical change. That response is summarized with the twin present imperatives, μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ. In this summons, Jesus offers people the choice to receive and enter into his kingdom through repentance and faith in the gospel or reject it for the of the kingdom of this world. Those who receive and enter his kingdom comprise the church, which is the earthly manifestation of the kingdom of God. This raises an important question that will be discussed in the next section.

### **The Kingdom of God and the Church**

“One of the most difficult questions in the study of the Kingdom of God is its relationship to the church,” writes Ladd.<sup>215</sup> What is the relationship of the kingdom of God to the church? What are the implications of that relationship to the role of the church in the world today? Does the church bear any responsibilities because of her relationship to the kingdom? Scholars note at least five aspects to the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church.

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<sup>214</sup> France, 25.

<sup>215</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 103.

## *The Church Is Not the Kingdom*

First, the church is not the kingdom of God. Ladd states, “The NT does not equate believers with the Kingdom.” He argues that the first missionaries in Acts “preached the Kingdom of God, not the church (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31)” and that “it is impossible to substitute ‘church’ for ‘kingdom’ in such sayings.”<sup>216</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert agree with Ladd, stating, “Just try replacing ‘kingdom’ in the NT with ‘church,’ or ‘church’ with ‘kingdom,’ and you quickly realize that synonyms they are not.” Beach agrees, stating, “The concepts of church and kingdom are not interchangeable. When Jesus says ‘the kingdom of God is within you’ (Luke 17:21), he does not mean that the church is within you.”<sup>217</sup> However, DeYoung and Gilbert suggest that the church and the kingdom “are actually closer than they appear.”<sup>218</sup> Professor Louis Berkhof explains, “[The kingdom of God] is closely related to the Church, though not altogether identical with it.”<sup>219</sup> The Westminster Assembly (1643-1653) said something similar in the WCF, which was first published in 1646. “The visible Church,” the WCF states, “is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ” (*WCF* 25.1).<sup>220</sup> However, Chad Van Dixhoorn, Westminster Assembly historian, writes, “It would be a mistake to woodenly equate the kingdom of God with the church.”<sup>221</sup> He continues:

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<sup>216</sup> Ladd, 109.

<sup>217</sup> Beach, “The Kingdom of God,” 54.

<sup>218</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 126.

<sup>219</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, New Combined ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 409.

<sup>220</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2003), 106–7.

<sup>221</sup> Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 340.

Members and contemporaries of the Westminster assembly did not see every reference to the kingdom of God as a reference to the church. They identified the kingdom of God with the proclamation of the gospel, with the coming of Jesus Christ, and with whatever else the passage and context might demand. Nonetheless, while the kingdom of God is not the church, the church is certainly the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

Van Dixhoorn concludes, “His kingdom is bigger than the church, but it certainly includes the church.”<sup>222</sup>

While some scholars are cautious not to equate the kingdom of God and the church, others believe the distinctions between the two are minimal. Scot McKnight, Professor of NT at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, notes, “When we compare present kingdom and present church, or future kingdom and future church, we come out with near-identical realities.”<sup>223</sup> His argument is based on the understanding that “the kingdom of which Jesus speaks is a people governed by a king.” This relational inference means, argues McKnight, “that its closet synonyms will be terms and metaphors having to do with people,”<sup>224</sup> and so he concludes that the terms “kingdom” and “church” are synonyms. He writes:

It is reasonable to say that *the kingdom is the church, and the church is the kingdom*—that they are the *same* even if they are not identical. They are the same in that it is the same people under the same King Jesus even if each term—kingdom, church—gives off slightly different suggestions.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Van Dixhoorn, 340–41.

<sup>223</sup> McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 206.

<sup>224</sup> McKnight, 74.

<sup>225</sup> McKnight, 206.

However, says Ladd, “The church is the people of the Kingdom, never that Kingdom itself.”<sup>226</sup> McKnight expresses his disagreement with Ladd when he says, “Just exactly how they can be ‘the people of the Kingdom’ without being ‘that Kingdom’ is not spelled out, and one must wonder what’s left.”<sup>227</sup>

Nevertheless, despite these differences, Ladd and McKnight agree that “there can be no kingdom without a church.” While Ladd sees “an inseparable relationship between the Kingdom and the church,” he maintains that “they remain two distinguishable concepts.” However, states Ladd, “There can be no Kingdom without a church—those who have acknowledged God’s rule—and there can be no church without God’s Kingdom.”<sup>228</sup> McKnight agrees, basing his argument on the “indissoluble connection” Jesus makes between “the present church (a people) to the future kingdom (a people)” in Matthew 16:16-19. He states, “[Jesus] connects what Peter does now in the church to what God will do then in the kingdom.” This connection leads him to conclude, “There is no kingdom now outside the church.”<sup>229</sup> This relational connection leads to a second aspect of the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church.

### *The Kingdom Gives Birth to the Church*

Secondly, the kingdom of God gives birth to the church. Ladd writes, “The Kingdom creates the Church. The dynamic rule of God, present in the mission of Jesus,

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<sup>226</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 110–11.

<sup>227</sup> McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 82.

<sup>228</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 117.

<sup>229</sup> McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 86–87.

challenged men and women to respond, bringing them into a new fellowship.”<sup>230</sup> He argues that those who accepted the presence of the kingdom of God “were constituted the new people of God, the children of the Kingdom, the true Israel, the incipient church.” However, Ladd makes a distinction between the visible church, what he calls “the empirical church,” and the kingdom of God, stating, “The fellowship created by the present acting of God’s Kingdom will include those who are not true children of the Kingdom.” Thus, says Ladd, “The empirical church has a twofold character. It is the people of the Kingdom, and yet it is not the ideal people, for it includes some who are actually not children of the Kingdom.” He concludes, “Thus entrance into the Kingdom means participation in the church; but entrance into the church is not necessarily synonymous with entrance into the Kingdom.”<sup>231</sup> Beach agrees with Ladd, stating, “The kingdom gives birth to the church.”<sup>232</sup> He describes this spiritual dynamic, saying, “The kingdom of God means that God is reigning redemptively and in a sanctifying manner so that life is brought into fellowship with him and in obedience to his will.” He goes on to say, “Apart from God’s life-restoring reign, the church is meaningless. The church constitutes the people surrendered to this reign of God, who live in communion with him.”<sup>233</sup> Hendriksen agrees with Ladd and Beach, adding that the church proceeds from the kingdom of God as it is “the community of men in whose hearts God is recognized as

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<sup>230</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 111.

<sup>231</sup> Ladd, 111.

<sup>232</sup> Beach, “The Kingdom of God,” 71.

<sup>233</sup> Beach, 71–72.

King.”<sup>234</sup> As a birthed fellowship of the kingdom of God, the church has responsibilities in this present age. This leads to the next three aspects of the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church.

### *The Church Bears Witness to the Kingdom*

A third aspect of the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church is that the church bears witness to the kingdom of God. Scholars describe the church’s witness to the kingdom in two ways. First, the church bears witness to the kingdom in proclaiming the gospel to the world. Second, the church bears witness to the kingdom by displaying or manifesting to the world the values, or life, of the kingdom.

#### **The Proclamation of the Gospel of the Kingdom**

First, scholars suggest that the church bears witness to the kingdom of God in proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom to the world. Ladd expresses this perspective when he says, “It will be the mission of the church to witness to the gospel of the Kingdom in the world.”<sup>235</sup> He describes “the gospel of the Kingdom” as “God’s redeeming acts in Christ both past and future.”<sup>236</sup> Ladd argues for the church’s ongoing responsibility, replacing Israel as the witness to God’s kingdom in the world.<sup>237</sup> The church preaches or proclaims the gospel in all the world. He writes, “Before the end

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<sup>234</sup> Hendriksen, *Mark*, 57.

<sup>235</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 113.

<sup>236</sup> Ladd, 111.

<sup>237</sup> Ladd, 113.

comes, ‘the gospel must first be preached to all nations’ (Mark 13:10).”<sup>238</sup> Therefore, he asserts, “The church’s mission is to witness to the Kingdom.”<sup>239</sup> Wilson agrees with Ladd, stating, “The central duty of the Christian church is that of preaching the kingdom.”<sup>240</sup> He argues that this duty stands on the basis of the authority already given to Jesus. Wilson points to the Great Commission where Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”<sup>241</sup> He reasons that since Jesus “already has all authority and we are not trying to get any more for him,” the church’s response is to “therefore go.” He writes, “On the basis of this established authority, we are to preach to the nations and announce to them their responsibility to submit to the authority of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>242</sup> He concludes, “We have a kingdom gospel, and so we ought to be preaching a kingdom gospel.”<sup>243</sup> Horton says something similar, stating, “The most crucial vocation of the church in this present age is the proclamation of the gospel.”<sup>244</sup> During this time between Jesus’ first and second coming, Horton suggests, “the kingdom is the gospel and the gospel is the

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<sup>238</sup> Ladd, 112.

<sup>239</sup> Ladd, 111.

<sup>240</sup> Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced: Christ’s Kingdom on Earth*, 76.

<sup>241</sup> Matt. 28:18-20.

<sup>242</sup> Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced: Christ’s Kingdom on Earth*, 84.

<sup>243</sup> Wilson, 76.

<sup>244</sup> Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 67.

kingdom.”<sup>245</sup> The “gospel of the kingdom,” which he maintains is synonymous with the Great Commission, is “the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins and the renewal of all things that has begun even now with the in-gathering of outcasts to Zion.”<sup>246</sup> While DeYoung and Gilbert agree with Horton and others, they offer a caution. They write, “It is wrong to say that the gospel is the declaration that the kingdom has come.”<sup>247</sup> Instead, based on Jesus’s proclamation in Mark 1:15, they suggest, “The gospel of the kingdom is the declaration of the kingdom of God *together with the means of entering it.*”<sup>248</sup>

### **The Manifestation of Kingdom**

Second, scholars suggest that the church bears witness to the kingdom of God in displaying or manifesting to the world the values or life of the kingdom. DeYoung and Gilbert write, “The kingdom of God is manifested in this present age in the church,”<sup>249</sup> meaning that “the church is meant to manifest the life of the kingdom of God to the world around it.”<sup>250</sup> They describe the manifestation of “the life of the kingdom of God” as taught in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, which include “a life of poverty of spirit, meekness, mercy, purity, and peace.”<sup>251</sup> They suggest, “The church is the primary arena

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<sup>245</sup> Horton, 65.

<sup>246</sup> Horton, 79.

<sup>247</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 110.

<sup>248</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, 110–11.

<sup>249</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, 126.

<sup>250</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, 127.

<sup>251</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, 127.



God has chosen to make his redemptive reign over his people visible.”<sup>252</sup> They call this event “the initial manifestation of the kingdom of God in this age.” Furthermore, they say, “As the world sees and responds to that kingdom life, the church will not only *manifest* the kingdom but also *bear witness* to it.”<sup>253</sup> Beach agrees, saying, “The church is the most significant manifestation of the kingdom of God as we await the return of Christ.”<sup>254</sup> He compares the kingdom of God to a wagon wheel where the institutional church is the hub of the wheel, and members of the church are “dispersed into the world” as the spokes. He writes:

The ‘hub’ fortifies and spiritually nurtures the church (its members) in the Word of God so that as ‘spokes’ the church goes out into the world to live under the lordship of Christ, under the reign and sway and truth of the king, in every dimension of life, in all of its arenas and dimensions.<sup>255</sup>

Ladd suggests that “one of the main tasks” of the church is “to display in this present evil age the life and fellowship of the Age to Come,” which he characterizes as “a humble willingness to serve” and “a fellowship undisturbed by ill-will and animosity.”<sup>256</sup>

Similarly, pastor and author Timothy J. Keller describes the church as “a pilot plant” of the kingdom of God that is “not simply a collection of individuals who are forgiven” but is a “royal nation” that is to be “a counterculture.” He writes, “The church is to be a new

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<sup>252</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, 127.

<sup>253</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, 127.

<sup>254</sup> Beach, “The Kingdom of God,” 55.

<sup>255</sup> Beach, 55.

<sup>256</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 113.

society in which the world can see what family dynamics, business practices, race relations, and all of life can be under the kingship of Jesus Christ.”<sup>257</sup>

### **The Embassy of the Kingdom**

Many scholars illustrate these two aspects of bearing witness to the kingdom of God using the picture of an embassy. DeYoung and Gilbert write, “The church acts as a sort of embassy for the government of the King. It is an outpost of the kingdom of God surrounded by the kingdom of darkness.”<sup>258</sup> Pastor and author Jonathan Leeman, research fellow with the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, uses the same illustration referring to the church as “embassies” and “outposts” of the kingdom of God.<sup>259</sup> Similarly, Horton refers to the church as “an embassy of grace in an empire of death.”<sup>260</sup> Looking to passages like 2 Corinthians 5:18-6:2 where Paul says, “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us,”<sup>261</sup> Horton writes, “The church is Christ’s embassy in the world.”<sup>262</sup> While conceptually similar, Wilson offers a different image, referring to the church as “the colonies of heaven” on earth.<sup>263</sup> He argues that heaven is the place that Christians are “just passing through.” In the end, he

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<sup>257</sup> Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), 54.

<sup>258</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 127.

<sup>259</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *How the Nations Rage: Rethinking Faith and Politics in a Divided Age* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2018), 144.

<sup>260</sup> Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 77.

<sup>261</sup> 2 Cor. 5:20.

<sup>262</sup> Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 13.

<sup>263</sup> Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced: Christ’s Kingdom on Earth*, 24.

writes, “The Lord will bring us all back *here* for the final and great transformation of the colonists (and the colonies).”<sup>264</sup> The church is the “advance team laboring to prepare for that glorious visit.” Thus, he suggests, “We are establishing colonies of heaven here, now.”<sup>265</sup> The church bearing witness to the kingdom is closely related to the next aspect of the relationship between the church and the kingdom.

### *The Church Extends the Kingdom*

Fourthly, as the church bears witness to the kingdom of God, the church extends the kingdom of God in the world. Berkhof says that the church is “the God-given means *par excellence* for the extension of the kingdom of God on earth.”<sup>266</sup> However, scholars have identified many ways that extension can happen.

Some suggest that the kingdom of God is extended only when people are converted. DeYoung and Gilbert assert, “The only way the kingdom of God—the redemptive rule of God—is extended is when he brings another sinner to renounce sin and self-righteousness and bow his knee to King Jesus.”<sup>267</sup> Horton agrees with DeYoung and Gilbert, stating, “Wherever Christ is forgiving and renewing sinners by his Spirit through the ministry of the gospel, the King is present and his kingdom is expanding.”<sup>268</sup> However, Keller disagrees. He contends:

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<sup>264</sup> Wilson, 24.

<sup>265</sup> Wilson, 24.

<sup>266</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 409.

<sup>267</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 121.

<sup>268</sup> Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 65.

To spread the kingdom of God is more than simply winning people to Christ. It is also working for the healing of persons, families, relationships, and nations; it is doing deeds of mercy and seeking justice. It is ordering lives and relationships and institutions and communities according to God's authority to bring in the blessedness of the kingdom."<sup>269</sup>

Therefore, for Keller, "the church is to be an agent of the kingdom."<sup>270</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert disagree, referring to the calling Jesus gave the disciples in the Great Commission. They state:

They were to 'witness'—not build, not establish, not usher in, not even build for the kingdom—but *bear witness* to it. They were subjects and heralds, not agents, of the kingdom.<sup>271</sup>

A second disagreement then arises about the church's role in extending the kingdom.

Scholars argue whether the church "builds" or "receives" the kingdom of God. Some suggest that it is more appropriate to describe the church as "receiving" or "entering" the kingdom of God, rather than "building" or "establishing" it. Horton writes, "[The kingdom of God] is an unshakable kingdom—incapable of being thwarted by our own unfaithfulness—precisely because it is not a kingdom that we are *building* but one that we are *receiving* (Heb. 12:28)."<sup>272</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert agree with Horton, stating, "The verbs associated with the kingdom are almost always passive (*enter, receive, inherit*). We'd do better to speak of living as citizens of the kingdom rather than telling our people that they build the kingdom."<sup>273</sup> Their reasoning is based on in part on the

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<sup>269</sup> Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, 54.

<sup>270</sup> Keller, 54.

<sup>271</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 139.

<sup>272</sup> Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 65.

<sup>273</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 21.

posture of the disciples in Acts 1:6. After Jesus's resurrection and just before his ascension the disciples ask him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" DeYoung and Gilbert assert, "They are under no illusion that it is now their task to establish the kingdom of God. It has been inaugurated without their help, and they recognize that it will be consummated without their help too."<sup>274</sup> They argue that while the kingdom of God "can be received by more and more people," this "does not entail the growth of the kingdom." They state, "We do not build it or cause it to grow because it already *is* and already has come." They conclude, "Biblically speaking, we as human beings may proclaim, enter, reject, inherit, and possess the kingdom, but it is God and God alone who establishes and ushers it in. It is God who will reconcile all things to himself through Christ (Col. 1:19-20)."<sup>275</sup> Ladd agrees, stating:

Men and women can enter the Kingdom (Matt. 5:20; 7:21; Mark 9:47; 10:23; etc.), but they are never said to erect it or build it. People can receive the Kingdom (Mark 10:15; Lk 18:17), inherit it (Matt. 25:34), and possess it (Matt. 5:4), but they are never to establish it.<sup>276</sup>

He goes on to say, "The Kingdom is the outworking of the divine will; it is the act of God himself. It is related to human beings and can work in and through them; but it never becomes subject to them." Furthermore, says Ladd, "The ground of the demand that they receive the Kingdom rests in the fact that in Jesus the Kingdom has come into history."<sup>277</sup>

However, N.T. Wright, NT theologian, disagrees with DeYoung and others. He writes, "What we can and must do in the present, if we are obedient to the gospel, if we are

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<sup>274</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, 131–32.

<sup>275</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, 134.

<sup>276</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 102.

<sup>277</sup> Ladd, 102.

following Jesus, and if we are indwelt, energized, and directed by the Spirit, is to build *for* the kingdom.”<sup>278</sup> He argues that after the Fall, the “project of creation” was corrupted, but “through the work of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, [God] equips humans to help in the work of getting the project back on track.”<sup>279</sup> He writes, “God intends his wise, creative, loving presence and power to be *reflected*—imaged, if you like—into his world *through* his human creatures.”<sup>280</sup> According to Wright, Christians take part in “redeeming” of creation by “accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God’s new world.”<sup>281</sup> He explains:

Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one’s fellow human beings and for what matters to one’s fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrective power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.<sup>282</sup>

Keller similarly writes, “The kingdom of God is the means for the renewal of the entire world and all the dimensions of life.”<sup>283</sup> Keller argues that since the “ministry” of the kingdom is “to heal all the results of sin in all the areas of life, then the church must use its resources to minister in every ‘circle.’ We are to do not just evangelism but must be a

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<sup>278</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, 1st ed (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2008), 208.

<sup>279</sup> Wright, 207.

<sup>280</sup> Wright, 207.

<sup>281</sup> Wright, 211, 208.

<sup>282</sup> Wright, 208.

<sup>283</sup> Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, 52.

‘full-service’ body.”<sup>284</sup> He suggests, “As things are brought back under Christ’s rule and authority, they are restored to health, beauty, and freedom.”<sup>285</sup>

Some scholars are concerned that these attempts to extend the kingdom in the world are resulting in a “mission creep” in the church. Horton expresses this, stating, “Today this mission creep takes many forms, but as in earlier periods the tendency is usually to expand the Great Commission to include a host of enterprises that Christ did not mandate.”<sup>286</sup> He suggests that part of the problem is due to “two extremes in contemporary Christian interpretations of the kingdom. He writes, “One extreme is to say that the kingdom is not present at all but is an entirely future reality.” This is a futurist eschatological position. “The other extreme,” he states, “is to say that the kingdom is present in its all-encompassing form, transforming the kingdoms of this age into the kingdom of Christ.” From this perspective, “the main calling of Christians and churches is to redeem the culture and extend Christ’s kingdom over” every aspect of life including “politics, the arts, entertainment, sports, economics, law, and every other aspect of public and private life.”<sup>287</sup> The latter perspective seems representative of the perspective expressed by Wright and Keller.

Another example of this perspective is expressed by Pastor Tim Dikau in his book *Plunging into the Kingdom Way*. In the book, Dikau shares how his church adopted certain community “practices” that he believes God is using to “usher His people towards

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<sup>284</sup> Keller, 52.

<sup>285</sup> Keller, 53.

<sup>286</sup> Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 16.

<sup>287</sup> Horton, 63.

the final destination: the river of peace that is the Kingdom of God.” He says that these practices “call upon the church to participate in the mission of God” and move us “toward the great river of God’s kingdom.”<sup>288</sup> These “practices” include things like moving as a congregation into a particular neighborhood, building social and monastic housing units, and developing a ministry to the homeless. They also changed their church vision statement to say, “GCBC is a community of people who receive and extend the radical welcome of God in Christ for the transformation of a neighborhood.”<sup>289</sup> Speaking about their decision to move as a congregation into a particular neighborhood, Dikau makes this observation, “When you inhabit a neighborhood together as part of a community, you begin to grasp a kingdom vision of God’s inbreaking into our neighborhoods.”<sup>290</sup>

However, Horton is concerned with this understanding of the church’s mission in this present age, stating, “The message of the kingdom determines its mission, and both determine the strategy.” Therefore, says Horton, “If the kingdom is chiefly concerned with transforming society, then we will focus on strategies that promote greater justice, peace, morality, and ecological stewardship in the world.” Conversely, argues Horton, in this age “the kingdom of God centers on the delivery of Christ, clothed in his gospel, to the ends of the earth through the ministry of Word and sacrament.”<sup>291</sup> This focus leads Horton to conclude, “The kingdom of God in this present phase is primarily *audible*, not

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<sup>288</sup> Tim Dikau, *Plunging into the Kingdom Way: Practicing the Shared Strokes of Community, Hospitality, Justice, and Confession* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 2, 3.

<sup>289</sup> Dikau, 16.

<sup>290</sup> Dikau, 12.

<sup>291</sup> Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 247.



visible. We hear the opening and shutting of the kingdom's gates through the proclamation of the gospel, in the sacraments, and in discipline."<sup>292</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert agree with Horton, stating, "The primary task of Christians in this age, with reference to the kingdom, is not to build it or establish it or even to build for it, but rather to be witnesses to this representing, suffering, forgiving King."<sup>293</sup> This leads to a fifth aspect of the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church.

### *The Church Holds the Keys of the Kingdom*

A fifth aspect of the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God is that the church holds "the keys of the kingdom" of God. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to the Apostle Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."<sup>294</sup> France comments, "Jesus declares Peter to be the steward (the chief administrative officer) in the kingdom of heaven, who will hold the keys."<sup>295</sup> France suggests that like Eliakim who was the new steward in the kingdom of David,<sup>296</sup> so too the steward of the kingdom "will open, and no one shall shut; he will shut, and no one shall open."<sup>297</sup> As a steward, says France, "he has both authority (over the rest of the

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<sup>292</sup> Horton, 67.

<sup>293</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 138.

<sup>294</sup> Matt. 16:19.

<sup>295</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 625.

<sup>296</sup> See Isa. 22:15-20.

<sup>297</sup> France, *Matthew*, 625.

household) and responsibility (to his master to administer the affairs of the house properly).”<sup>298</sup> France argues that the authority of the keys is primarily an administrative role of “declaring [God’s] will on earth.” He suggests that this role does not refer “to condemning or forgiving a person but to making decisions about what is right and wrong.”<sup>299</sup> He writes, “The keys are those of the storehouses, to enable him to make appropriate provision for the household, not those of the outer gate, to control admission.”<sup>300</sup>

However, Ladd disagrees with France. While Ladd says the “administrative control over the church” interpretation is possible, he argues that “another interpretation lies nearer at hand.”<sup>301</sup> Ladd suggests, “The authority to bind and loose involves the admission or exclusion of people from the realm of the kingdom of God.”<sup>302</sup> Ladd argues that “the final destiny of individuals will be determined by the way they react to [the] representatives of Jesus. To receive them is to receive the Lord who sent them.” As such, he concludes, “Through the proclamation of the gospel of the Kingdom in the world will be decided who will enter into the eschatological Kingdom and who will be excluded.”<sup>303</sup> Hendriksen echoes Ladd. He writes, “The one who ‘has the keys’ of the kingdom of

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<sup>298</sup> France, 625.

<sup>299</sup> France, 696–97.

<sup>300</sup> France, 625.

<sup>301</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 115.

<sup>302</sup> Ladd, 115–16.

<sup>303</sup> Ladd, 117.

heaven determines who should be admitted and who must be refused admission.”<sup>304</sup> He goes on to say that the use of the keys involves the “binding and loosing,” which refers to “forbidding and permitting” of certain things, beliefs, and actions in the church in accordance with the Word of God.<sup>305</sup> He explains:

It is the duty of the church as a whole and as represented by those who by the Lord have been appointed to rule over it *to bind*, that is, *to forbid* violation of [the principles of Scripture], and *to loose*, that is, *to permit*, whatever is in harmony with them.<sup>306</sup>

Scholars describe this authority of the kingdom as having been given by Jesus to the church. DeYoung and Gilbert write, “The keys of the kingdom of God—the authority of that kingdom, the right to act in its name—are given in this age, by the King, to the church.”<sup>307</sup> Leeman expresses his agreement with DeYoung and Gilbert when he says that the keys of the kingdom refer to “the authority [of the local church] to interpret and then to render a judgment.”<sup>308</sup> He describes the authority of the local church as “the authority to declare before the nations, ‘This is/is not a true gospel confession’ and, ‘This is/is not a true gospel confessor.’”<sup>309</sup> France prefers to speak of this as “administrative

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<sup>304</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1973), 650.

<sup>305</sup> Hendriksen, 650.

<sup>306</sup> Hendriksen, 702.

<sup>307</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 126.

<sup>308</sup> Leeman, *How the Nations Rage: Rethinking Faith and Politics in a Divided Age*, 140.

<sup>309</sup> Leeman, 140–41.

authority.”<sup>310</sup> He suggests that binding and loosing does not refer “to condemning or forgiving a person but to making decisions about what is right and wrong.”<sup>311</sup>

Scholars suggest that there are two keys of the kingdom, namely, the preaching of the gospel and the exercise of church discipline. Beach states, “The kingdom-keys are the preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline toward repentance.”<sup>312</sup> Hendriksen agrees, referring to the keys of the kingdom as “the preaching of the gospel and the exercise of discipline.”<sup>313</sup> He explains that the exercise of church discipline includes “the right of exclusion or excommunication from the church and, upon repentance, of readmission into the church.”<sup>314</sup> Van Dixhoorn agrees. Commenting on the meaning of the keys of the kingdom, he writes, “It is the responsibility of church officers to judge by the Word of God, as far as possible, who is going to heaven and who is not.”<sup>315</sup> Like others, he suggests that they do this by the preaching of the Word and by church discipline.<sup>316</sup> Horton suggests that the keys of the kingdom are “really synonymous” with the “gospel of the kingdom.”<sup>317</sup> He writes, “They both refer to the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins and the renewal of all things that has begun even now with the in-

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<sup>310</sup> France, *Matthew*, 626.

<sup>311</sup> France, 696.

<sup>312</sup> Beach, “The Kingdom of God,” 61.

<sup>313</sup> Hendriksen, *Matthew*, 650.

<sup>314</sup> Hendriksen, 702.

<sup>315</sup> Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, 403.

<sup>316</sup> Van Dixhoorn, 404.

<sup>317</sup> See Matt. 24:14.

gathering of outcasts to Zion. Furthermore, both phrases are synonymous with the Great Commission.”<sup>318</sup>

### *Summary of the Kingdom of God and the Church*

In summary, the literature suggests at least five aspects to the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church. First, while scholars note that they are closed related, the church is not the kingdom of God. The church is a part of the kingdom of God, but the kingdom of God is bigger than the church. However, there can be no kingdom of God without the church, and there can be no church without the kingdom of God. This leads to a second aspect of the relationship between the two, namely, the kingdom of God gives birth to the church as a product of God’s dynamic rule over his kingdom. According to the literature reviewed, as people receive the message of the kingdom of God, they are made into a new people and brought into fellowship with God and one another. As a birthed fellowship, the literature suggests that the church has three primary responsibilities in the kingdom of God in this present age: the church bears witness to the kingdom, the church extends the kingdom, and the church holds the keys of the kingdom. These three responsibilities represent a third, fourth, and fifth aspect to the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church.

The first responsibility of the church in the kingdom of God in the present age, and a third aspect of the relationship between the church and the kingdom, is that the church bears witness to the kingdom through the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom, and by manifesting the life of the kingdom. Based on the Great Commission,

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<sup>318</sup> Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 79.

the literature reveals that the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom is the mission, central duty, or most crucial vocation of the church in the world. Related to this, as the church proclaims the gospel of the kingdom, part of her witness to the kingdom includes manifesting the life, or values, of the kingdom of God to the world. In fact, until Jesus returns, some scholars suggest that the church is the most significant manifestation of the kingdom of God in the world. Therefore, the literature refers to the church as a new society, colony of heaven, embassy of grace, or kingdom outpost that shows the world what life can be under the kingship of Jesus.

The second responsibility of the church in the kingdom of God in this present age, and a fourth aspect of the relationship between the church and the kingdom, is that the church extends the kingdom of God. Although some suggest that the church builds the kingdom of God, others suggest that as the church bears witness to the kingdom through the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom and manifesting the life of the kingdom, God extends the kingdom through the church's work.

The final responsibility of the church in the kingdom of God in this present age, and a fifth aspect of the relationship between the church and the kingdom, is that the church holds the keys of the kingdom. The church holds God-given authority to admit and exclude people from the kingdom of God. The keys are used when the church proclaims the gospel of the kingdom and exercises church discipline, which includes admission into the church, excommunication from the church, and readmission upon repentance. The officers of the church are given the responsibility to see that the keys of the kingdom are properly used. However, if the primary responsibility of the church

includes the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom, another important question arises for discussion in the next section.

### **Proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom in a Pluralistic Society**

If proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom is the mission and central duty of the Christian church, how do pastors faithfully proclaim the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society? As Charpentier and others have pointed out, an enormous challenge faces the contemporary evangelical preacher, namely, how to defend the gospel to a culture awash in pluralism.

Pluralism in the West is a present and growing reality. Carson states that pluralism, as an empirical reality, refers to “the sheer diversity of race, value systems, heritage, language, culture, and religion in America.”<sup>319</sup> Moreover, Carson observes that pluralism is “characteristic of most countries in the Western world.”<sup>320</sup> Political scientist John Inazu and Keller make a similar observation, in what they refer to as “the fact of pluralism today.”<sup>321</sup> As a result of this “fact,” say Inazu and Keller, “Americans, like citizens of most Western nations today, lack agreement about the purpose of our country, the nature of the common good, and the meaning of human flourishing.”<sup>322</sup>

However, the “fact of pluralism today” is not a problem that has just arrived in the twenty-first century. William H. U. Anderson, Professor of Religious Studies at

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<sup>319</sup> Carson, “The Challenge from Pluralism to the Preaching of the Gospel,” 100.

<sup>320</sup> Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 16.

<sup>321</sup> Timothy Keller and John D. Inazu, *Uncommon Ground: Living Faithfully In a World of Difference* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2020), xv.

<sup>322</sup> Keller and Inazu, xv.

Concordia University of Edmonton, states, “Pluralism is not a new idea. The whole Old Testament is given in the pluralistic context of polytheism.”<sup>323</sup> Furthermore, he writes, “The NT church successfully navigated pluralism and evangelism.”<sup>324</sup> In looking to the examples from Scripture and considering the impact of pluralism in society today, contemporary scholars demonstrate multiple strategies for preachers in a pluralistic society to faithfully proclaim the gospel of the kingdom. Before reviewing practices for doing this, it will be helpful to review the nature of the pluralism in contemporary Western society.

### *Describing Pluralism*

In their book *Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy*, Reformed theologian Richard J. Mouw and Dutch philosopher Sander Griffioen write, “A ‘pluralism’ is an ‘ism’ about a ‘plurality.’ In this sense a pluralistic account gets set forth when someone is convinced that there is something important to say about a given ‘manyness.’”<sup>325</sup> Mouw and Griffioen have in mind “the kinds of pluralities that are important to contemporary discussions regarding the proper ordering of society.”<sup>326</sup>

Following the logic of Mouw and Griffioen, Smith describes pluralism as a “the social task” of “forging a life in common” in a society made up of people with a diversity

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<sup>323</sup> William H. U. Anderson, “A Theology of Religious and Cultural Tolerance in a Pluralistic Context from Amos 2:1-3,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 88, no. 3 (July 2017): 259.

<sup>324</sup> William H. U. Anderson, “From Marilyn Manson to Amos: Navigating Pluralism in the Twenty-First-Century West,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (October 2017): 327.

<sup>325</sup> Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1993), 13.

<sup>326</sup> Mouw and Griffioen, 15.



of worldviews.<sup>327</sup> Smith believes that Christians are “called to live alongside” other-than-Christians, “even being catalysts to help forge and sustain the *compromise* that is inherent to political life.”<sup>328</sup> Smith is leaning on an Augustinian idea found in *The City of God*. In that work, Augustine proposes that Christians on earth, whom he refers to as “the heavenly city, or rather the part of it which sojourns on earth and lives by faith,” are to seek to live in common with “the earthly city” for the sake of peace. In this “state of pilgrimage,” says Augustine, the heavenly city “avails itself of the peace of the earth, and, so far as it can without injuring faith and godliness, desires and maintains a common agreement among men regarding the acquisition of the necessities of life.”<sup>329</sup> Smith, following this line of thinking, says that “forging a life in common” means “the human endeavor of seeking to live in some kind of harmony and peace with our neighbors—the ability to collaborate on necessities of human life in the shared territory of creation.”<sup>330</sup> He believes that this collaboration is “not merely governmental or political; it is part of the human endeavor of solidarity of all sorts of needs and goods.”<sup>331</sup>

VanDrunen uses similar language to describe pluralism in his book *Politics After Christendom*. In the book he describes pluralism as the endeavor of “people who are different from one another” seeking to live in a peaceful coexistence with one another.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting The King: Reforming Public Theology*, vol. 3, Cultural Liturgies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 132.

<sup>328</sup> Smith, 3:133.

<sup>329</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 629.

<sup>330</sup> Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 3:132, 134.

<sup>331</sup> Smith, 3:133.

<sup>332</sup> David VanDrunen, *Politics After Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 186.

For VanDrunen, “the peaceful coexistence of a political community”<sup>333</sup> is dependent upon some degree of a shared moral vision” for the good.<sup>334</sup> Pluralism has “the goal of bringing people of different religious persuasions together into a peaceful political community with some shared vision of the common good.”<sup>335</sup> Kristen Deede Johnson, Professor of Theology and Christian Formation at Western Theological Seminary, uses similar language as VanDrunen, defining pluralism descriptively as the “co-existence of distinct faiths, cultures, ethnicities, races, and ideologies within one society.”<sup>336</sup>

In summary, a pluralism may be described as the attempt of a pluralistic society—a society made up of a variety of distinct worldviews—to peacefully coexist with one another by “forging a life in common.” Furthermore, scholars have noted a variety of types and expressions of pluralisms that exist in contemporary Western society. However, not all pluralisms are the same and one type poses a greater challenge to preachers than the rest.

### *Types of Pluralisms*

Scholars agree that there are “three fundamental kinds of societal plurality.”<sup>337</sup> Although scholars use slightly different names, the three kinds of societal pluralities,

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<sup>333</sup> By “political community” he refers broadly to “the social life of the *polis*” meaning “the larger community in a geographical region in which individuals and smaller communities interrelate;” see *Politics After Christendom*, 17.

<sup>334</sup> VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom*, 187.

<sup>335</sup> VanDrunen, 193.

<sup>336</sup> Kristen Deede Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism: Beyond Tolerance and Difference*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine, v. 15 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>337</sup> Jonathan Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity: From ‘Liberal Pluralism’ to ‘Christian Pluralism,’” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 35, no. 2 (2006): 145–46.

proposed by Mouw and Griffioen, are associational pluralism, contextual pluralism, and directional pluralism.<sup>338</sup> Similar to Mouw and Griffioen, Smith correspondingly refers to these three types as structural pluralism, cultural pluralism, and confessional pluralism.<sup>339</sup>

Scholars also observe that each of the three types of pluralisms can be expressed, as Mouw and Griffioen note, “as either a descriptive or a normative pluralism.”<sup>340</sup>

According to Mouw and Griffioen, the descriptive sense is “a way of *acknowledging*” the existence of diversity “as a fact that is worth nothing” and “not necessarily as a means of advocating that diversity.”<sup>341</sup> Carson refers to this as “empirical pluralism,” which he writes, is “observable and largely measurable.”<sup>342</sup> Descriptive or empirical pluralism, suggests Carson, “is neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad.”

The second expression of pluralism, normative pluralism, refers to a normative or cherished sense of pluralism. Mouw and Griffioen state that the normative sense is a “means of *advocating* diversity” as “a good state of affairs.”<sup>343</sup> Carson also sees this expression in what he calls “cherished pluralism.” He writes, “By ‘cherished pluralism,’ I mean to add an additional ingredient to empirical pluralism—approval.”<sup>344</sup> Carson

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<sup>338</sup> Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 16–17.

<sup>339</sup> For example, see: Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity,” 145–49; Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 3:135–37; Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 15–17.

<sup>340</sup> Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 17.

<sup>341</sup> Mouw and Griffioen, 14.

<sup>342</sup> Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 13.

<sup>343</sup> Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 14, 17.

<sup>344</sup> Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 18.

suggests that this is the position of many in the West, stating, “By and large, the media and the intellectuals of the West cherish pluralism.”<sup>345</sup>

Mouw and Griffioen note that these “two sets of distinctions can be combined” with the three types of pluralisms leading to six possibilities: descriptive directional pluralism, normative directional pluralism, descriptive associational pluralism, normative associational pluralism, descriptive contextual pluralism, and normative contextual pluralism.<sup>346</sup> For example, a “descriptive directional pluralism” highlights “the fact of a plurality of directional perspectives,” whereas “normative directional pluralism” advocates for “directional plurality as a good state of affairs.”<sup>347</sup> Commenting on these categories, Smith remarks, “We might think of this as the difference between descriptive recognition of de facto pluralities and a normative call to preserve or foster such pluralities as pluralisms.”<sup>348</sup> A closer look at each of these three types and expressions will be helpful to the contemporary preacher.

### **Associational or Structural Pluralism**

A first type of pluralism that exists in Western society is associational or structural pluralism. Mouw and Griffioen, who refer to this as associational pluralism, have in mind a spectrum of human associations. These associations include the family as

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<sup>345</sup> Carson, 19.

<sup>346</sup> Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 17–18.

<sup>347</sup> Mouw and Griffioen, 17.

<sup>348</sup> Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 3:137.

well as “highly ‘voluntary’ groups such as clubs and corporations.”<sup>349</sup> Thus, due to the nature of this type, they “see no difficulties as Christians in endorsing” either descriptive or normative accounts of associational pluralism.<sup>350</sup>

Like Mouw and Griffioen, Skillen, who refers to this type as “structural pluralism,” is also in favor of endorsing both descriptive and normative accounts of associational pluralism. In a slight broadening of the category, he describes it as “the diversity of organizational competencies and social responsibilities.” For Skillen, this pluralism includes the “complex array of social structures” that exist in society including the “unique identities of family life, schooling, art, science, politics (and much more).”<sup>351</sup>

Following Skillen, Chaplin and Smith also refer to this pluralism as “structural.”<sup>352</sup> Like Skillen, they broaden this type of pluralism to include associations that, as Chaplin writes, “are not fundamentally associational (i.e. voluntary) in character.”<sup>353</sup> Structural pluralism, Chaplin writes, “refers to the plurality of qualitatively distinct, functionally specific associations, institutions, or communities populating a modern society.”<sup>354</sup> Advocating for the normative sense of it, Chaplin also proposes “that structural plurality has ontological primacy, since it arises from the most fundamental and enduring imperatives of our creative social nature, giving rise to what might be called the

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<sup>349</sup> Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 16.

<sup>350</sup> Mouw and Griffioen, 18.

<sup>351</sup> James W. Skillen, *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 83–84.

<sup>352</sup> Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity,” 146; Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 3:135–36.

<sup>353</sup> Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity,” 146.

<sup>354</sup> Chaplin, 146.

social analogue of ‘creational kinds.’”<sup>355</sup> Smith agrees, saying, “This plurality of social structures is rooted in a *creational* calling. Families and schools and businesses aren’t just ‘good ideas’ that we came up with; they are forged in response to something that creation itself calls for.”<sup>356</sup>

Although VanDrunen doesn’t specifically refer to associational or structural pluralism, he alludes to the concept. As institutions and associations are formed, says VanDrunen, “people establish practices and organizations in order to pursue mutual goals in cooperative fashion.”<sup>357</sup> But unlike Chaplin and Smith, who see structural pluralism as a response to a “creational calling,” VanDrunen sees the forming of institutions and associations as a direct, normative response to “the pluralistic character of the Noahic covenant in general.”<sup>358</sup> By the Noahic covenant, VanDrunen is referring to the covenantal relationship that God established with Noah and instituted for the entire world in Genesis 8:21-9:17.<sup>359</sup> VanDrunen’s proposal is “that the Noahic covenant commissions human beings to form a variety of institutions” including family, business enterprises, non-profit organizations, and civil government.<sup>360</sup> These institutions, he argues, “provide us with the associational life we need.”<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Chaplin, 146–47.

<sup>356</sup> Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 3:136.

<sup>357</sup> VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom*, 83.

<sup>358</sup> VanDrunen, 182.

<sup>359</sup> VanDrunen, 182.

<sup>360</sup> VanDrunen, 81.

<sup>361</sup> VanDrunen, 182.

In summary, associational, or structural pluralism is the idea that for a society made up of a variety of distinct worldviews and beliefs to attempt to peacefully coexist,” the society will inevitably, and as some scholars argue, necessarily, establish organizations or institutions, such as schools, governments, and businesses. This type of pluralism is expressed as descriptive and normative of a pluralistic society.

### **Contextual or Cultural Pluralism**

A second type of pluralism in Western society is contextual or cultural pluralism. Mouw and Griffen, who refer to this as “contextual pluralism,” suggest that this plurality arises due to differing cultural contexts in a society.<sup>362</sup> Chaplin and Smith refer to this variety of contexts as “cultural plurality.”<sup>363</sup> Chaplin, speaking descriptively, refers to it as “the plurality of distinct cultural contexts existing across the world, increasingly within one and the same (multicultural) society, and arising from differences in language, ethnicity, custom, or historical tradition.”<sup>364</sup> Smith describes it as “the diverse expressions realized in a human culture across history and around the globe.”<sup>365</sup> For example, says Smith, speaking descriptively and normatively, “The realization of ontological structures like families and businesses takes on different vibes, flavors, and looks, depending on the cultural context.”<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 16.

<sup>363</sup> Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity,” 147; Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 3:136.

<sup>364</sup> Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity,” 147.

<sup>365</sup> Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 3:136.

<sup>366</sup> Smith, 3:136.

Some scholars contend that contextual pluralism is a normative structure that is, as Chaplin puts it, “rooted in divinely created potentials.”<sup>367</sup> Furthermore, Chaplin exhorts Christians to embrace normative contextual pluralism. He writes:

The plurality of particular cultures, each opening up a different facet of God’s gifts of social intercourse, communal organization, linguistic and artistic expression, intellectual and technical exploration and so on, is not something that should be resisted by Christians but rather joyfully celebrated.<sup>368</sup>

Smith agrees, saying, “The divine calls folded into creation can be unfurled with a different flair in Indonesia or Indiana.”<sup>369</sup>

In summary, contextual, or cultural pluralism is the description of a society made up of a plurality of ethnicities, languages, histories, and customs. Scholars agree that this type of pluralism is normative in a pluralistic society, and some suggest it ought to be “joyfully celebrated.”

### **Directional or Confessional Pluralism**

A third type of pluralism that exists in the West is directional or confessional pluralism. This type of pluralism addresses the plurality of values or worldviews that exist in a society. Mouw and Griffioen refer to this as “the diversity of visions of the good life that give direction to people’s lives.”<sup>370</sup> These “directional visions can be

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<sup>367</sup> Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity,” 147; Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 3:136.

<sup>368</sup> Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity,” 147.

<sup>369</sup> Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 3:136.

<sup>370</sup> Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 16.



associated with an organized religious or with some other value orientation.”<sup>371</sup> Chaplin uses a similar definition. “Directional pluralism,” he writes, “embraces the plurality of religions, worldviews, or other fundamental spiritual orientations” in contemporary societies.<sup>372</sup> Smith, following Chaplin, writes, “This form of plurality is ‘directional’ insofar as these spiritual orientations and fundamental connections of the good direct and govern what we pursue, what we value, and how we act in society.”<sup>373</sup> This directional aspect leads Smith, along with Skillen, to call it “confessional plurality,”<sup>374</sup> meaning, in Smith’s words, “that not all citizens agree on ‘the good.’”<sup>375</sup>

While these scholars acknowledge directional perspectives in society (i.e. – descriptive directional pluralism), some scholars see challenges with advocating for directional plurality “as a good state of affairs” (i.e. – normative directional pluralism). For example, Mouw and Griffioen have serious objections to normative directional pluralism.<sup>376</sup> In their estimation, normative directional pluralism is “the one version of pluralism that would lead” to ultimate or “directional relativism,” something they see as “incompatible with a commitment to the gospel.”<sup>377</sup> Similarly, Chaplin argues that “the plurality of directions reveals divergent spiritual responses—shalom-enhancing or

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<sup>371</sup> Mouw and Griffioen, 16.

<sup>372</sup> Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity,” 147.

<sup>373</sup> Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 3:136–37.

<sup>374</sup> Smith, 3:137; James W. Skillen, *The Good of Politics: A Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 125; Skillen, *Recharging the American Experiment*, 84.

<sup>375</sup> Smith, “The Reformed (Transformationist) View,” 155.

<sup>376</sup> Mouw and Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 17–18.

<sup>377</sup> Mouw and Griffioen, 18.

shalom-denying—to the normative structural and cultural possibilities given by God in creation.” Therefore, while associational and contextual plurality “are divine gifts to be celebrated,” Chaplin contends, “this clearly cannot be said of directional plurality.” He writes, “Deep differences of spiritual direction cannot, from a Christian viewpoint, be regarded as anything other than the bitter fruits of the Fall.”<sup>378</sup> Smith’s thinking follows Chaplin’s. He remarks, “It is *this* plurality that poses our most fundamental challenge, since it strikes at the very possibility of imagining ourselves having a common life together.”<sup>379</sup> According to Smith, this form of pluralism is “the most challenging” for forging a life in common because “this sort of pluralism means we disagree about the very shape of the good life.”<sup>380</sup> Carson takes the argument one step farther, suggesting that this type of pluralism has led to a contemporary phenomenon called “philosophical pluralism,” which says, “The only absolute creed is the creed of pluralism.”<sup>381</sup> Therefore, Carson contends, “[Confessional Christianity] must vigorously oppose many features of philosophical pluralism.”<sup>382</sup>

Moreover, Christians in the West will have many opportunities to “vigorously oppose” normative directional pluralism because, as scholars suggest, it is “the dominant ideology” in the West.<sup>383</sup> Carson says, “The impact of philosophical pluralism on

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<sup>378</sup> Chaplin, “Rejecting Neutrality, Respecting Diversity,” 148.

<sup>379</sup> Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 3:137.

<sup>380</sup> Smith, 3:137.

<sup>381</sup> Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 19.

<sup>382</sup> Carson, 22.

<sup>383</sup> Carson, “The Challenge from Pluralism to the Preaching of the Gospel,” 109.

Western Culture is incalculable. It touches virtually every discipline.” Furthermore, he says, “It achieves its greatest victory in redefining religious pluralism so as to render heretical the idea that heresy is possible. Tolerance is radically redefined and masks a sometimes brutal intolerance.”<sup>384</sup> Chris Altrock, pastor and author of *Preaching to Pluralists: How to Proclaim Christ in a Postmodern Age*, similarly states, “It’s not simply that pluralism is found among people in the postmodern era; it’s that pluralism is espoused by and validated by the political, media, literary, and others forms of leadership.”<sup>385</sup>

This point leads to another important aspect of normative directional pluralism: it is directly tied to postmodernism. Altrock connects the two, writing:

[Postmodernism’s] primary characteristic is that it denies the possibility of impartial objectivity in human knowledge. It affirms that all knowledge is subjective and the result of interpretation. As a result, pluralism and relativism are the hallmarks of postmodernism.”<sup>386</sup>

He argues that normative directional pluralism is “the dominant characteristic of postmoderns” who “do not believe in the existence of one absolute truth that applies to all people at all times,” but rather “believe in a plural number of truths.”<sup>387</sup> Carson writes, “The outlook that [philosophical pluralism] spawns is often labeled postmodernism.”<sup>388</sup> In fact, says Carson, “The sheer diversity of Western culture tends to nourish a kind of de

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<sup>384</sup> Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 52.

<sup>385</sup> Chris Altrock, *Preaching to Pluralists: How to Proclaim Christ in a Postmodern Age* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 8.

<sup>386</sup> Altrock, 8.

<sup>387</sup> Altrock, 8–9.

<sup>388</sup> Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 19.

facto postmodernity.” Moreover, he suggests, “Philosophical pluralism is the approach to cultural diversity that is supported by—and supports—postmodernity.”<sup>389</sup> Carson notes that postmodernism and pluralism take a stance that “objective truth in most realms is impossible, and that therefore the only proper stance is that which disallows all claims to objective truth.”<sup>390</sup>

Pastor Wesley C. Telyea also sees the connection between pluralism and postmodernism. Like Altrock and Carson, he describes postmodernism as “the reaction against the assumption that there is an objective, rational, reasonable explanation to all that exists and for all that happens.”<sup>391</sup> Moreover, he notes, “Propositional truth seems immature in such a plural environment where people are aware of different worldviews.”<sup>392</sup>

For the preacher of the gospel of the kingdom of God, the dominant ideology in the West of normative directional pluralism, and “the outlook it spawns,” known as postmodernism, present enormous challenges. For example, Carson observes several “correlatives of pluralism”<sup>393</sup> such as the growing secularization of Western society, rising biblical illiteracy in America, and “rugged individualism veering toward

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<sup>389</sup> Carson, 22.

<sup>390</sup> Carson, 57.

<sup>391</sup> Wesley C Telyea, “A Postmodern Lutheran Hermeneutic for Preaching in the Twenty-First Century,” *Logia* 24, no. 3 (2015): 21.

<sup>392</sup> Telyea, 21–22.

<sup>393</sup> “By ‘correlatives of pluralism’ I am referring to a variety of societal trends that are partly causes and partly effects of pluralism...They are not exclusively causes of philosophical pluralism, nor are they exclusively effects,” *The Gagging of God*, 37, 52.

Narcissism.”<sup>394</sup> He writes, “The bearing of all this on the preacher of the gospel is obvious. We must not only declare the whole counsel of God but do so in an environment where the subject is perceived to be vaguely irrelevant.”<sup>395</sup> Furthermore, he argues, normative directional pluralism “challenges our right to evangelize.”<sup>396</sup> William H. U. Anderson, Professor of Religious Studies at Concordia University of Edmonton, explains, “Once the exclusivity of Christianity is compromised by scholars and laity alike, there is no longer a strong motivation for evangelism.”<sup>397</sup> Altrock makes a similar observation. He writes, “[Postmoderism’s] greatest obstacle is found in how it questions the existence of absolute truth and authority and therefore weakens the potency of preaching, which makes radical claims about absolute truth and authority.”<sup>398</sup> Furthermore, Altrock suggests, “Postmoderns are seeking a spirituality with room for their pluralism. This, in my estimation, is the largest obstacle we face in preaching evangelistically to postmoderns.”<sup>399</sup>

In summary, directional, or confessional pluralism accounts for the fact that in a pluralistic society there exists a variety of worldviews and beliefs about the good. It is expressed descriptively, as an observation that many beliefs and worldviews exist in a pluralistic society, and normatively, as something to be advocated for or promoted. In the

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<sup>394</sup> Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 38–52.

<sup>395</sup> Carson, “The Challenge from Pluralism to the Preaching of the Gospel,” 110.

<sup>396</sup> Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 492.

<sup>397</sup> Anderson, “From Marilyn Manson to Amos,” 321.

<sup>398</sup> Altrock, *Preaching to Pluralists: How to Proclaim Christ in a Postmodern Age*, 9.

<sup>399</sup> Altrock, 27.

West, scholars observe that normative directional pluralism is the dominant ideology, which has led to a phenomenon called philosophical pluralism. Related to postmodernism, philosophical pluralism takes the stance that “the only absolute creed is the creed of pluralism.” In this mindset, there is no such thing as objective or observable truth but rather a “plural number of truths.” As a result, the phenomenon of philosophical pluralism is putting pressure on preachers to “change the shape of the gospel.” How, then, are preachers to faithfully proclaim the gospel of the kingdom of God in a pluralistic society that advocates for philosophical pluralism as the normative way of life?

### *Practices for Proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom of God*

In a postmodern society “awash in pluralism,” faithfully proclaiming the exclusive nature of the gospel of the kingdom of God is challenging and yet possible. Addressing this challenge, Charpentier suggests, “Preachers must engage in effective argumentation even when many in their audience may bristle at the exclusive claims of Scriptures.”<sup>400</sup> But what does “an effective strategy of argumentation before a pluralistic audience”<sup>401</sup> look like? Scholars suggest several practices for effectively proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in a postmodern society awash in pluralism.

### **Expository Preaching**

One practice for proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society is expository preaching. K.A. Beville, pastor and visiting professor of Intercultural Studies

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<sup>400</sup> Charpentier, “What Does Evangelical Preaching in a Pluralistic Culture Look Like?,” 95–96.

<sup>401</sup> Charpentier, 96.

and Practical Ministry at Tyndale Theological Seminary, asserts, “The expository sermon is the superior sermon form, especially in a postmodern world.”<sup>402</sup> Expository preaching, describes Beville, “is preaching that depends upon a passage of Scripture as the foundation for the entire sermon.”<sup>403</sup> It is “Bible-centered,” and the biblical text “must be explained in such a way that people understand what God is saying to them.” This kind of preaching “creates an expectation among hearers to hear what it is that God is saying.”<sup>404</sup> He observes in a postmodern, pluralistic society people “are suspicious of truth claims, especially when they consider them to be the opinions of an individual.” Therefore, he suggests, “Expository preaching represents the best approach to solving the dilemma of communicating truth, primarily because the truths are not the preacher’s own, but the truth claims of God.”<sup>405</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, states, “I believe that the only form of authentic Christian preaching is expository preaching.”<sup>406</sup> Similar to Beville, he defines expository preaching as “that mode of Christian preaching that takes as its central purpose the presentation and application of the text of the Bible.”<sup>407</sup> He writes, “The heart and soul of expository preaching—of any true Christian preaching—is reading the Word of God and then

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<sup>402</sup> K. A. Beville, *Preaching Christ in a Postmodern Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 87.

<sup>403</sup> Beville, 89.

<sup>404</sup> Beville, 69–70.

<sup>405</sup> Beville, 88.

<sup>406</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 49.

<sup>407</sup> Mohler Jr., 65.

explaining it to the people so that they understand it.”<sup>408</sup> He argues, “We have the Bible, and if we truly believe the Bible to be the written Word of God—the perfect, divinely inspired revelation of God—then expositional preaching is the only option available to us.”<sup>409</sup> Like Beville, he suggests that what listeners need to hear is the truth claims of God, not the opinions of a preacher. He writes, “It all finally comes down to the question of who has the right to speak. Does the preacher have the right to speak, or does that right belong to God?” And for Mohler, “That is the difference between life and death for our people.”<sup>410</sup> Keller agrees with Beville and Mohler, stating, “I believe that expository preaching should provide the main diet of preaching for a Christian community.”<sup>411</sup>

Expository preaching, he explains:

grounds the message in the text so that all the sermon’s points are points in the text, and it majors in the text’s major ideas. It aligns the interpretation of the text with the doctrinal truths of the rest of the Bible (being sensitive to systematic theology). And it always situates the passage within the Bible’s narrative, showing how Christ is the final fulfillment of the text’s theme (being sensitive to biblical theology).<sup>412</sup>

Keller similarly argues, “Expository preaching is the best method for displaying and conveying your conviction that the whole Bible is true.”<sup>413</sup> Furthermore, like Beville and Mohler, Keller argues that expository preaching “makes it easier for hearers to recognize that the authority rests not in the speaker’s opinions or reasoning but in God, in his

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<sup>408</sup> Mohler Jr., 52.

<sup>409</sup> Mohler Jr., 63–64.

<sup>410</sup> Mohler Jr., 64.

<sup>411</sup> Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, NY: Redeemer/Viking, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2015), 32.

<sup>412</sup> Keller, 32.

<sup>413</sup> Keller, 32.



revelation through the text itself.”<sup>414</sup> Zack Eswine, pastor, apologist, and author, agrees with these scholars, and yet he offers a caveat.

In his book *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, Eswine suggests that the biblical sermon in a “post-everything world”<sup>415</sup> ought to “follow God’s homiletic lead” in preaching.<sup>416</sup> He notes, “God is the preacher’s hero. God is every generation’s preeminent professor of homiletics.”<sup>417</sup> Therefore, he argues, “Preachers need to lay hold of God’s homiletic range in order to meet the demands of post-everything preaching.”<sup>418</sup> Based on Colossians 1:28-29, Eswine notes “four basic preaching essentials” that preaching is meant to be regardless of when and where a preacher finds himself: preaching is meant to be 1) Christ-centered, 2) prophetic (“warning everyone”), 3) catechetical (“teaching everyone”), and 4) wisdom (“with all wisdom”).<sup>419</sup> He suggests that because “God uses varying kinds of language” in his Word, so the biblical sermon ought to as well.<sup>420</sup> Some sermons will be “prophetic”, that is, “direct, plain, and searching.”<sup>421</sup> Some sermons will be “priestly,” which is “redemptive-story, doctrinal,

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<sup>414</sup> Keller, 36.

<sup>415</sup> “A post-everything world is saturated with multiple contexts and assumptions,” Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons That Connect with Our Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 12.

<sup>416</sup> Eswine, 19.

<sup>417</sup> Eswine, 103.

<sup>418</sup> Eswine, 105.

<sup>419</sup> Eswine, 105.

<sup>420</sup> Eswine, 106–7.

<sup>421</sup> Eswine, 118.

ethical, liturgical, and apologetic.”<sup>422</sup> Other sermons will be “sage” sermons, where “each sermon contributes to the larger and unfinished picture,” enabling “people to widen what they see of reality.”<sup>423</sup> Eswine suggests that this “wisdom kind of sermon may be particularly well suited for unchurched cultural contexts.”<sup>424</sup>

In addition to the practice of expository preaching, scholars note a second practice for proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society.

### **Engaging Contextualization**

A second practice for proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society is engaging contextualization. Altrock states: “What is needed in our current postmodern culture is a contextualized approach to evangelistic preaching which speaks to postmoderns in their language.”<sup>425</sup> He describes contextualization as “simply understanding the cultural context and speaking the gospel to that context.”<sup>426</sup> Altrock recommends that preachers in a pluralistic society should preach “using vocabulary, illustrations, and images that do not assume prior knowledge of the biblical story and the gospel.”<sup>427</sup> Keller agrees with Altrock’s call for contextualization, but he broadens the category to include more than contextualizing one’s vocabulary in a sermon. He writes:

[Contextualization] means to resonate with yet defy the culture around you. It means to antagonize a society’s idols while showing respect for its

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<sup>422</sup> Eswine, 134.

<sup>423</sup> Eswine, 146.

<sup>424</sup> Eswine, 155.

<sup>425</sup> Altrock, *Preaching to Pluralists: How to Proclaim Christ in a Postmodern Age*, 45.

<sup>426</sup> Altrock, 45.

<sup>427</sup> Altrock, 51.

people and many of its hopes and aspirations. It means expressing the gospel in a way that is not only comprehensible but also convincing.<sup>428</sup>

As such, Keller suggests “six sound practices” for contextualized preaching to a pluralistic society:

- Use accessible and well-explained vocabulary.
- Employ respected authorities to strengthen your theses.
- Demonstrate an understanding of doubts and objections.
- Affirm in order to challenge baseline cultural narratives.
- Make gospel offers that push on the culture’s pressure points.
- Call for gospel motivation.<sup>429</sup>

Keller summarizes, “Good contextualized preaching appreciates yet challenges cultural narratives and norms and helps people see things that are invisible to them but that control them.”<sup>430</sup>

Like Keller, Eswine also broadens the definition of contextualization to consider not only the vocabulary in a sermon, per se, but also the cultural narratives of a place. He suggests that biblical sermons must engage the cultures of a pluralistic society<sup>431</sup> and argues that sermons that engage the cultures will do three things. First, according to Eswine, sermons that engage the culture will “account for the accents” of the hearer in a particular context.<sup>432</sup> He describes accounting for the accents as the way the hearer may interpret what the biblical text says based on their cultural grammar. By “cultural grammar” he means “the way that a particular person or region accounts for God, people,

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<sup>428</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 99.

<sup>429</sup> Keller, 103–20.

<sup>430</sup> Keller, 166.

<sup>431</sup> Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, 19.

<sup>432</sup> Eswine, 181.

place, and self.”<sup>433</sup> The culturally engaged sermon will not only say what the text says but will “say what the text says by accounting for how people culturally hear what the text says.”<sup>434</sup> He suggests that the preacher’s explanation of a biblical text ought to include a cultural connection, which highlights the way a hearer may understand what text says, as well as a “biblical redirection,” which helps the hearer understand what the biblical text actually means.<sup>435</sup> Keller states that preaching must “engage with the foundational cultural narratives of your time.”<sup>436</sup> He explains:

[Foundational cultural narratives] are things that “everybody knows,” premises that seem so self-evident as to be nearly invisible and unquestionable to those who hold them. They are usually expressed in slogans or epigrammatic “truisms” that are spoken to end discussion—they are thought to be beyond argument.<sup>437</sup>

Like Eswine, Keller encourages preachers to make a “biblical redirection” with foundational cultural narratives. He comments, “Unless we call these out and contrast them to the great themes and offers of the Bible, both believers and unbelievers in a culture will be unconsciously influenced by them.”<sup>438</sup>

Secondly, Eswine argues that a contextualized sermon will “detect idol talk.”<sup>439</sup> He explains, “Idolatry forms the core conflict of any spiritual movement that a preacher

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<sup>433</sup> Eswine, 182.

<sup>434</sup> Eswine, 184.

<sup>435</sup> Eswine, 188.

<sup>436</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 115.

<sup>437</sup> Keller, 115.

<sup>438</sup> Keller, 115.

<sup>439</sup> Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, 218.

will face regardless of generation or geography.”<sup>440</sup> He describes idolatry as “a traitor to the works of God’s hands” that gives “the love that belongs to God alone to something or someone else.” He says idols come in the form of “idol things” – “the misuse of optical visuals that fill a culture” – and “idol thoughts” – “the misuse of mental visuals that fill a person.”<sup>441</sup> He notes that different cultures have different “dominant idols.” Therefore, he concludes, “Clarity of language without the conviction of the conscience regarding the idolatries of our cultural contexts will hinder our preaching effectiveness in a post-everything world.”<sup>442</sup> Keller adds that contextualization “means to antagonize a society’s idols while showing respect for its people and many of its hopes and aspirations.”<sup>443</sup>

Thirdly, Eswine argues that contextualized sermons will “discern devilish spin.”<sup>444</sup> He writes, “One must not underestimate the fact that Satan is a powerful preacher.”<sup>445</sup> In every culture context, Satan “arouses suspicion of God, makes caricatures of God, and misuses what God has said.”<sup>446</sup> The preacher’s task then is to identify Satan’s “slander” about God, people, place, and self.<sup>447</sup> Preachers must also examine that their preaching is not “devilish” in giving false guilt, false peace, misinterpreting the redemptive-story, misrepresenting biblical ethics, and offer something

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<sup>440</sup> Eswine, 218.

<sup>441</sup> Eswine, 219.

<sup>442</sup> Eswine, 229.

<sup>443</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 99.

<sup>444</sup> Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, 231.

<sup>445</sup> Eswine, 232.

<sup>446</sup> Eswine, 235.

<sup>447</sup> Eswine, 232–33.

of than Christ for unbelievers and believers.<sup>448</sup> Therefore, suggests Eswine, “preaching is an act of spiritual war.”<sup>449</sup>

### **Lovingly Expose the “Bankruptcy” of the Age**

Related to contextualization, a third practice for proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society is for preachers to lovingly expose the “bankruptcy of the age.” Carson writes, “The bankruptcy of the moral, ethical, relational, and spiritual dimensions must be lovingly exposed again and again.”<sup>450</sup> He describes the “bankruptcy of the age,” stating, “There is a profound and bitter emptiness at the hearts of many men and women in Western culture.”<sup>451</sup> Therefore, suggests Carson, “Human emptiness and moral confusion must be traced to its roots *in biblical theology*; only in that framework can the historic gospel truly address the underlying problem.”<sup>452</sup> R. Albert Mohler Jr., President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, says something similar, stating, “The emptiness of the secular wasteland haunts most postmodern persons. They long for something more.”<sup>453</sup> Mohler suggests that the longing in people is due to a “spiritual hunger.” He says, “God has placed that hunger within lost persons so that they might desire Christ.” In response to this “emptiness” and “spiritual hunger,” Mohler suggests

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<sup>448</sup> Eswine, 238–40.

<sup>449</sup> Eswine, 244.

<sup>450</sup> Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 496.

<sup>451</sup> Carson, 495.

<sup>452</sup> Carson, 495.

<sup>453</sup> Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent*, 128.

that gospel preachers “must seek constantly to turn spiritual hunger toward the true food of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>454</sup>

However, some scholars see this “spiritual hunger” not so much as an “emptiness” that “haunts” the lost, but as an “echo” of God’s image that exists in all human beings. Jerram Barrs, Professor of Christianity and Contemporary Culture at Covenant Theological Seminary, describes this as the “echoes of Eden” that are a “means of God’s revelation of himself” in “the pool of memories within the human race of the truth about our condition.” He explains:

It seems that among every people on the face of this earth there is a recollection of the original good creation; there is awareness that the world we now live in is broken and fallen, and there is recall of the promise and hope of the restoration of what is good.<sup>455</sup>

Eswine agrees with Barrs, stating, “Persons were made in God’s own image, and though thoroughly ruined and spiritually killed by sin, elements of that image remain in them.”<sup>456</sup>

In response to these “echoes of Eden,” Eswine builds on Barrs’ concept and encourages preachers to look for four types of “echoes” in each biblical text: 1) echoes of creation, 2)

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<sup>454</sup> Mohler Jr., 128.

<sup>455</sup> Jerram Barrs, *Echoes of Eden: Reflections on Christianity, Literature, and the Arts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), chap. 5, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).

<sup>456</sup> Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, 43.

echoes of the fall,<sup>457</sup> 3) echoes of redemption,<sup>458</sup> and 4) echoes of heaven.<sup>459</sup> By doing this, suggests Eswine, preachers prepare their sermon “for redemptive action.”<sup>460</sup>

According to some scholars, part of lovingly exposing the “bankruptcy of the age,” includes sermons that expose “the inaccuracies of pluralism.” Altrock writes, “Pluralism is simply inaccurate when it says that all religions are the same.” He goes on to say, “Taken to its logical extreme, pluralism is untenable. As much as a postmodern may espouse pluralism, he does not practice pluralism in every area of his life.” For example, “Pluralism has an intolerant side. Pluralism says that it is always wrong to try to convince someone that his views are wrong. Pluralism affirms the truth of all viewpoints—except the viewpoint that says there is one absolute truth.”<sup>461</sup> Keller uses a similar approach to Altrock. He writes, “I don’t directly make the naked claim ‘Christianity is a superior religion,’ and I certainly don’t malign other faiths. Instead, I stress Christianity’s distinctiveness.”<sup>462</sup> For example, on the problem of suffering, Keller states, “Only Christians believe in a God who says, ‘Here I am alongside you. I have

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<sup>457</sup> “The mutual human condition that contemporary believers or unbelievers share with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God’s people to glorify and enjoy him or for those who resist God to properly regard him and to be reconciled to him.” See Eswine, 45.

<sup>458</sup> By “echoes of redemption”, Eswine encourages preachers to look for the “divine provisions” of the Biblical text. He says that “these provisions of God’s Word” not only “anchor us” in the original text, but also “echo what God gave us when he created us and what we are being redeemed toward.” See Eswine, 50–51.

<sup>459</sup> “[Christians] are being redeemed toward a new kingdom. Heaven is coming. God not only substantially heals, he will soon completely heal those who have trust in Christ.” See Eswine, 56.

<sup>460</sup> Eswine, 42.

<sup>461</sup> Altrock, *Preaching to Pluralists: How to Proclaim Christ in a Postmodern Age*, 105–6.

<sup>462</sup> Timothy J Keller, “Preaching Amid Pluralism: Elevating Christ in a Culture That Sees All Religions as Equal,” *Leadership* 23, no. 1 (2002): 34.



experienced the same suffering you have. I know what it is like.’ No other religion even begins to offer that assurance.”<sup>463</sup> Furthermore, says Keller, “On occasion I address directly the weakness of pluralism’s foundations.”<sup>464</sup>

To understand the bankruptcy and inaccuracies of society, scholars suggest that preachers ought to engage in some manner of respectful dialogue with other-than-Christian viewpoints. Stone suggests, “What is called for in our time is careful study, respectful dialogue, and a close and sympathetic attention to the rich particularity of the stories, practices, and way of life of those who adhere to other faiths.” In his opinion, “There is no contradiction between a willingness to bear faithful witness to Christ and a genuine openness to the non-Christian.”<sup>465</sup> Charpentier adds, “A dichotomy does not necessarily exist between an unwavering commitment to biblical truth and a respectful tone in communication.”<sup>466</sup> He writes, “Contemporary evangelical preachers should proclaim the gospel passionately, faithfully, *and* respectfully (1 Peter 3:15).”<sup>467</sup> Furthermore, he suggests, “The heart of the gospel should be homiletically packaged with an understanding and appreciation of the culture’s core philosophical presuppositions from a posture of humility.”<sup>468</sup> He calls this “posture of humility” the “tones of appreciation” in preaching. Charpentier suggests that the “tones of appreciation” in

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<sup>463</sup> Keller, 35.

<sup>464</sup> Keller, 35.

<sup>465</sup> Stone, “Preaching in a Pluralistic World,” 22.

<sup>466</sup> Charpentier, “What Does Evangelical Preaching in a Pluralistic Culture Look Like?,” 101.

<sup>467</sup> Charpentier, 102.

<sup>468</sup> Charpentier, 102.

preaching “can affirm some core longings of the culture, and then they can challenge where the cultures tries to go with these longings.”<sup>469</sup> Keller recommends, “To reach people gospel preachers must challenge the culture’s story at points of confrontation and finally retell the culture’s story, as it were, revealing how its deepest aspirations for good can be fulfilled only in Christ.”<sup>470</sup> Carson, however, offers a warning. Although Carson encourages dialogue that find outs what other-than-Christians think and treats them courteously and respectfully, he warns against entering the discussion in a way that “assumes nothing and accords opposing opinions the same authority as Christian opinions.” He writes, “If we insist that they be accorded the same *authority*, we are implicitly adopting philosophical pluralism, at the cost of affirming biblical Christianity.”<sup>471</sup>

However, some scholars argue that the bankruptcy of the age is not something to be exposed and confronted, but rather embraced. Opposed to Carson and others, Yarbrough argues that a pluralistic society “provides a preacher with ways to embrace pluralism in the pulpit.”<sup>472</sup> To that end, she calls preachers to embrace a pluralist preaching model. She describes what a “pluralist preaching” model looks like:

Pluralist preaching is an adventure. The preacher is challenged to find new meanings in old texts and to participate in defining what is “gospel” in the twenty-first century. The successful pluralist preacher will be one who

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<sup>469</sup> Charpentier, 103.

<sup>470</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 20.

<sup>471</sup> Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 508.

<sup>472</sup> Yarbrough, “Interfaith Dialogue in the Pulpit—Proclaiming an Emerging Gospel,” 17.

will delight in the deep wisdom that other religious traditions offer about the divine mystery Christians call God.<sup>473</sup>

As such she calls on preachers to reframe and proclaim biblical texts “in a radically new way” that will “lift up the beliefs and practices of other world religious traditions.” When the preacher does this, she argues, “The preacher creates a pluralistic and inclusive gospel.”<sup>474</sup> Similar to Yarbrough, Stone suggests, “The first thing to be said about other faith traditions is not that they are deficient, but that they are different.”<sup>475</sup> However, Carson counters Yarbrough:

If the gospel is presented, then, as that gracious message which connects fallen human beings with the good and sovereign God who made them, and with other people who have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, some men and women will be open to hear more.<sup>476</sup>

### **The Primacy of Biblical Theology**

A fourth practice for proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society is the primacy of biblical theology in preaching. Carson affirms, “I shall insist on the priority, in the present culture, of preaching biblical (as opposed to systematic) theology.”<sup>477</sup> Carson argues that many Americans are biblically illiterate and do not have “at least some knowledge of the pattern ‘creation/fall/ten commandments/Christ/judgment.’” Thus, systematic theological approaches to evangelism, what Carson calls “atemporal outlines of the gospel,” that answer questions

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<sup>473</sup> Yarbrough, 17.

<sup>474</sup> Yarbrough, 18.

<sup>475</sup> Stone, “Preaching in a Pluralistic World,” 22.

<sup>476</sup> Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 496.

<sup>477</sup> Carson, 496.

like “What is God like? What is at the heart of human need? What is sin?” are “virtually incoherent” to “those who know nothing about the Bible’s plotline.”<sup>478</sup> Instead, Carson suggests setting the good news of Jesus Christ “into a biblical worldview.” He writes, “A world both biblically illiterate and sold out to philosophical pluralism demands that our proclamation of the gospel be a subset of biblical theology.”<sup>479</sup> Carson suggests preachers use the “Bible’s plotline as the necessary framework in which to understand the gospel.” The preacher’s sermon may “work through large swaths of the Bible’s plotline” including the doctrines of creation and the fall, to establish both the grounds of human responsibility before God and the nature of the human dilemma. He argues, “Without this kind of structure the gospel will not be rightly heard.”<sup>480</sup> Altrock agrees, saying, “Postmodernity necessitates that preachers start farther back in the biblical worldview and biblical story than in previous generations.”<sup>481</sup> Altrock suggests that preachers in a pluralistic society must preach “messages that tutor [the listener] in the basics of the gospel and of the biblical story.”<sup>482</sup> He writes, “We will need to introduce postmoderns to the larger biblical narrative and worldview before we introduce them to Jesus.”<sup>483</sup> Mohler adds, “People must first understand God the Creator before they will understand God the

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<sup>478</sup> Carson, 501–2.

<sup>479</sup> “Biblical theology refers to the theology of the biblical corpora as God progressively discloses himself, climaxing in the coming of his Son Jesus Christ, and consummating in the new heaven and the new earth. In other words, sequence, history, the passage of time—there are foundational to biblical theology,” Carson, 502.

<sup>480</sup> Carson, 504.

<sup>481</sup> Altrock, *Preaching to Pluralists: How to Proclaim Christ in a Postmodern Age*, 52.

<sup>482</sup> Altrock, 51.

<sup>483</sup> Altrock, 55.

Redeemer.”<sup>484</sup> Similar to this, when Eswine encourages preachers to locate the four types of echoes in each biblical text, he is encouraging them to prioritize biblical theology.<sup>485</sup>

### **Repeatedly Preach the Historic Gospel**

Related to the fourth practice, a fifth practice for proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society is to repeatedly preach “the historic gospel.” Whereas biblical theology locates the text in the larger plotline of redemptive history, the goal of preaching the historic gospel is to include the person and work of Jesus Christ specifically in the sermon. Carson explains, “We must herald, again and again, the rudiments of the historic gospel.”<sup>486</sup> He continues, “The historic gospel embraces a comprehensive articulation of what God has disclosed of himself in history, climactically in Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection.” This historic gospel “is the good news of God’s redemption and the dawning of the eschatological kingdom in the person and work of Christ, with all that means for this life and for the life to come.” Thus, says Carson, “All of our preaching and teaching must revolve around the great, central truths of the gospel.”<sup>487</sup> Franklin S. Janini, the Head of the Undergraduate School at the South African Theological Seminary, agrees with Carson. He writes, “Christianity must never be cut off from its roots, if it wants to remain biblical Christianity.” He argues that in a pluralistic society, “there can be no room for syncretism in the body of Christ. It is either full

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<sup>484</sup> Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent*, 129.

<sup>485</sup> Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, 42–56.

<sup>486</sup> Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 505.

<sup>487</sup> Carson, 506.

submission to the Lord Jesus Christ and denunciation of paganism or no Christianity at all.” Therefore, he concludes, “No matter what the context is, the message of Christ should be proclaimed, and the good news should be preached.”<sup>488</sup>

Preaching “the historic gospel” will address the exclusive claims of Jesus. For example, Altrock encourages preacher to “preach messages that explore the basis for Christian exclusivism.”<sup>489</sup> He writes, “What gives Jesus the right to claim that he alone is the source of salvation? The answer to that question may be the very thing that can help turn postmoderns toward Christ despite the gospel’s exclusive [claims].”<sup>490</sup> Additionally, Altrock encourages preachers to “preach messages that reveal the exclusivism of other faiths.”<sup>491</sup> However, Yarbrough disagrees with Carson, Altrock, and others. She challenges preacher to “find new meanings in old texts and to participate in defining what is ‘gospel’ in the twenty-first century.” Furthermore, she calls on preachers to create “a pluralistic and inclusive gospel.”<sup>492</sup> In contrast with Yarbrough, Telyea argues, “Too many preachers today think they have to find something new to say in order to be a good preacher.” Instead, suggests Telyea, “Preachers must with their hearts commit to preaching what the church has always believed, taught, and confessed: ‘Jesus was born for you and died for you for the remission of your sins.’”<sup>493</sup> Keller agrees with Telyea,

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<sup>488</sup> Franklin Steven Jabini, “Preaching Christ in a Pluralistic World: The Message and Method of the Mission to Samaria in Acts 8,” *Conspectus* 9 (March 2010): 66.

<sup>489</sup> Altrock, *Preaching to Pluralists: How to Proclaim Christ in a Postmodern Age*, 99.

<sup>490</sup> Altrock, 100.

<sup>491</sup> Altrock, 105.

<sup>492</sup> Yarbrough, “Interfaith Dialogue in the Pulpit—Proclaiming an Emerging Gospel,” 17–18.

<sup>493</sup> Telyea, “A Postmodern Lutheran Hermeneutic for Preaching in the Twenty-First Century,” 24.

stating, “Every time you expound a Bible text, you are not finished unless you demonstrate how it shows us that we cannot save ourselves and that only Jesus can.”<sup>494</sup>

### **Remember Where One Has Been**

A sixth practice for proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society is for preachers to “remember where you’ve been.” Eswine cautions, “Forgetting where we have been is deadly. We no longer reach out to who we once were, and we fail to extend the time and grace that we ourselves have needed to get where we are.”<sup>495</sup> To counter this, Eswine encourages preachers to “remember where you’ve been.”<sup>496</sup> As a part of this, Eswine encourages preachers to consider that preaching to a pluralistic society is “an act of love.”<sup>497</sup> He writes, “It is our greater love more than our greater technology or techniques that will glorify God and transform a generation.”<sup>498</sup> Eswine suggests that preachers learn how to love when they remember where they have been.<sup>499</sup> Telyea says something similar to Eswine, stating, “Preachers must acknowledge their own sin and need for redemption as their starting point for sermon preparation.” He explains, “When preachers fail to begin their sermon preparation process with repentance, they fail to begin with Christ.”<sup>500</sup> Keller agrees, stating, “If your heart isn’t

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<sup>494</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 48.

<sup>495</sup> Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, 87.

<sup>496</sup> Eswine, 78.

<sup>497</sup> Eswine, 82.

<sup>498</sup> Eswine, 84.

<sup>499</sup> Eswine, 87.

<sup>500</sup> Telyea, “A Postmodern Lutheran Hermeneutic for Preaching in the Twenty-First Century,” 23.

regularly engaged in praise and repentance, if you aren't constantly astonished at God's grace in your solitude, there's no way it can happen in public." He suggests that preachers develop "a deep, rich, private prayer life" in order engage their hearts.<sup>501</sup> The next practice is related to this one.

### **Desperate Dependence on the Holy Spirit**

A seventh practice for proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society is "desperate dependence" on the Holy Spirit. Keller writes, "The difference between good preaching and *great* preaching lies mainly in the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the listener as well as the preacher."<sup>502</sup> Keller suggests that preachers ought to glory in their infirmities so that the power of the Holy Spirit "may be made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9)." He explains:

This is a discipline by which you constantly remind yourself of what you are under your own power. It leads to desperate dependence on the Spirit—but along with this desperation will come the joyful freedom of knowing that in the end nothing in preaching rests on your eloquence, your wisdom, or your ability.<sup>503</sup>

Eswine agrees with Keller, suggesting that preachers must "cry out for the Holy Spirit."<sup>504</sup> He writes, "A post-everything environment exposes the limits of our homiletics and forces us back to what we most need—the Holy Spirit of God."<sup>505</sup> This

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<sup>501</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 168.

<sup>502</sup> Keller, 11.

<sup>503</sup> Keller, 207.

<sup>504</sup> Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, 245.

<sup>505</sup> Eswine, 246.



observation leads him to ask, “Does our approach to preaching reflect our active dependence upon the Holy Spirit?”<sup>506</sup> He suggests that a preacher who is dependent upon the Holy Spirit in preaching will “trust the Spirit’s means.” A Spirit-dependent preacher will 1) faithfully expose the meaning of the biblical text, 2) preach the person and work of Christ, 3) not avoid the issues of sin, righteousness, and judgment, 4) promote the character of Christ, and 5) preach boldly (not loudly, but with “a capacity to speak the Word in the midst of what threatens us”).<sup>507</sup> A key component of this, says Eswine, is “becoming acquainted with how we grieve and quench the Spirit,” which will require “attention to our own spiritual formation.”<sup>508</sup> Charpentier agrees with Keller and Eswine. He writes, “Rhetorical strategies should be employed in conjunction with a dependence on the power of the Spirit to transform lives.”<sup>509</sup> As such, he warns preachers to “avoid forcing a false dichotomy between effective communication skills and the need to depend upon the power of the Spirit.” Instead, he suggests, “*Both* are important.”<sup>510</sup>

### *Summary of Proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom in a Pluralistic Society*

How to defend the gospel in a culture awash in pluralism has always provided challenges for faithful preachers of the gospel of the kingdom of God. While not a new problem of the twenty-first century, the literature suggests that pluralism in the West is a

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<sup>506</sup> Eswine, 246.

<sup>507</sup> Eswine, 251–52.

<sup>508</sup> Eswine, 254.

<sup>509</sup> Charpentier, “What Does Evangelical Preaching in a Pluralistic Culture Look Like?,” 103.

<sup>510</sup> Charpentier, 104.

present and growing reality due to the sheer diversity of race, value systems, heritage, language, culture, and religion in places like America. Pluralism is not a theory but a fact in most Western nations today.

Pluralism has been described as an attempt of a pluralistic society to peacefully coexist with one another by forging a life in common. In a pluralistic society like America, the literature suggests that Christians are called to live alongside other-than-Christians by seeking to live in some kind of harmony and peace with our neighbors. This harmony includes the ability to collaborate on necessities of human life in the shared territory of creation, which is part of the human endeavor of solidarity. Scholars suggest that a pluralistic society may be accounted for with a variety of types and expressions. However, according to the literature, one type and expression of pluralism presents enormous challenges for the preacher of the gospel of the kingdom, namely, normative directional pluralism.

Normative directional pluralism advocates for an ultimate relativism incompatible with a commitment to the gospel of the kingdom. Scholars suggest that this type of pluralism is now the dominant ideology in the West, and it has led to a philosophical pluralism that says, “The only absolute creed is the creed of pluralism.” Subsequently, scholars note how philosophical pluralism leads to postmodernism, which renders objective truth in most realms impossible. Related to this, scholars note a growing secularization of Western society, a rising biblical illiteracy in America, and a rugged individualism veering toward narcissism. The challenge for the preacher of the gospel of the kingdom is how to declare the whole counsel of God faithfully in an environment where many find the exclusive claims of the Bible to be intolerant at best, or destructive

at worst. Moreover, scholars suggest that normative directional pluralism, together with the phenomena of philosophical pluralism and postmodernism, is putting pressure on preachers to change the shape of the gospel.

In response to these pressures, scholars suggest several practices for effectively and faithfully proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society. One practice is expository preaching. Expository preaching is Bible-centered preaching that grounds the message in the biblical text. The literature argues that it is the best method for conveying one's conviction that the whole Bible is true. Additionally, in a society that questions truth claims, especially those perceived as individual opinions, scholars argue that expository preaching can most faithfully present the message as the claims of God and not the preacher. In crafting biblical expository sermons, scholars suggest that preachers follow God's homiletic lead, mirroring the homiletic range in each biblical text.

A second practice for proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society is engaging contextualization. The literature describes contextualization as the way in which the preacher accounts for the culture in which he is preaching. In part, this happens when a preacher uses accessible and well-explained vocabulary that accounts for the biblical literacy, or illiteracy, in a particular context. Additionally, the literature suggests that preachers contextualize when they engage with the cultural narratives of a place by appreciating and challenging those narratives with biblical redirection. Part of this includes detecting the idols of a context and discerning ways in which Satan may be arousing suspicion of God, making caricatures of God, and misusing what God has said. When preachers do this, they engage in an act of spiritual war.

A third practice is to lovingly expose the bankruptcy of the age. According to the literature, this includes acknowledging the bitter emptiness that haunts most people in a pluralistic, postmodern age. It also includes identifying the longings and spiritual hunger within all human beings as biblical echoes point to the image of God in them. When it comes to pointing out the differences and distinctiveness of Christianity with other worldviews and religions, scholars suggest that preachers engage the emptiness and longings within people with humility, respect, and grace. They can do this trusting that as the gracious message of the gospel is presented, some may be open to hearing more.

A fourth practice is the primacy of biblical theology in preaching. As opposed to systematic theology, which presents atemporal outlines of the gospel, biblical theology locates the biblical text within the overarching plotline of the Bible. Scholars suggest that preachers will help biblically illiterate listeners who advocate for philosophical pluralism rightly hear the gospel. The literature suggests that in a pluralistic world people must first know God the creator before they will understand God the redeemer.

A fifth practice is for preachers to repeatedly preach the historic gospel. The literature suggests that this includes a comprehensive articulation of the good news of God's redemption and the dawning of the eschatological kingdom in the person and work of Christ. According to scholars, preaching the historic gospel will preach the exclusive claims of and about Jesus. Moreover, as one scholar suggests, the sermon is not finished until the preacher demonstrates how the text shows that people cannot save themselves and that only Jesus can.

A sixth practice is for preachers to remember where they have been. According to the literature, preachers do this when they consider that they too are recipients of God's

grace. Preachers remember where they have been when they begin their sermon preparation process with praise and repentance. The literature suggests that only the preacher who is developing a deep, rich, private prayer life will be able to remember where he's been and engage the hearts of his listeners.

A seventh practice is desperate dependence on the Holy Spirit. Scholars state that this work of the Holy Spirit in the preacher that makes the difference between good and great preaching. According to the literature, preachers who glory in their weaknesses will be led to desperate dependence on the Holy Spirit that leads him to cry out for help. Scholars suggest that homiletic strategies and effective communications skills are not enough. Instead, they argue that preachers need to depend upon the Holy Spirit for he alone has the power to transform the lives of the listener and the preacher.

### **Summary of Literature Review**

Considering the literature examined, there are several considerations for pastors who seek to faithfully proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. The literature suggests that when Jesus announced, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel," he was making a public declaration that God's revolution to overthrow Satan, evil, and sin was taking place. Scholars argue that Jesus was announcing the establishment of his kingship, of God's redemptive reign, and of the work of new creation. Jesus was beginning the work of bringing earth and heaven back into harmony as he proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom. The literature suggests that the kingdom of God is not limited to a particular place or time in history, but rather it is an abstract reality that is both here and not yet fully here; it is both eternal and eschatological; both fulfilled and awaited. Scholars argue

that Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom of God that is "at hand" is a summons to all human beings that demands an urgent response: either receive him and his kingship, through repentance and faith in the gospel or reject him. Those who receive him, enter his kingdom and become the earthly manifestation of the kingdom of God, which is also known as the church. For the pastor who seeks to proclaim faithfully the kingdom of God is at hand, the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church is worth noting.

The literature suggests that the church bears a unique relationship to the kingdom of God and subsequently certain responsibilities because of that relationship. While the church is closely related to the kingdom of God, many scholars argue that the church is not the kingdom of God. Rather, according to the literature, the church is a birthed fellowship of the kingdom of God. Scholars describe the church as a new society or counterculture that can be likened to an embassy of grace, colony of heaven, or kingdom outpost. As such, the literature suggests that the church bears certain responsibilities in the kingdom of God in this present age. Scholars argue that chief of these responsibilities is the church's call to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom, which is the primary mission, central duty, and crucial vocation of the church in the world in this present age. Related to this, the literature suggests that the church is called to manifest the life of the kingdom. As the gospel of the kingdom is faithfully proclaimed and manifested, scholars suggest that the church bears witness to the kingdom, extends the kingdom, and uses the keys of the kingdom. Moreover, while some scholars argue that the church builds or establishes the kingdom of God, others suggest that the church merely receives or enters it. In the latter perspective, the church is an instrument of Jesus's kingdom that bears witness to the kingdom of God, extends the message of the kingdom of God, and exercises the

authority of the kingdom. If proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom is the primary mission and central duty of the church in the world, as some scholars suggest, then pastors must consider how to do that, especially in a culture awash in pluralism.

The literature argues that contemporary preachers in the West proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand in a culture that is committed to a type of pluralism called normative directional pluralism. This type of pluralism expresses itself in a phenomenon known as philosophical pluralism, which has spawned the outlook known as postmodernism. The mantra of this type of pluralism asserts, “The only absolute creed is the creed of pluralism.” Taken together with the secularization of the West, rising biblical illiteracy, and rugged individualism, pastors who seek to proclaim faithfully the exclusive claims of Jesus’s kingdom face enormous pressures to change the shape of the gospel of the kingdom of God. Considering such pressures, the literature suggests several practices. These practices include expository preaching, careful contextualization, lovingly exposing the bankruptcy of the age, the use of biblical theology in preaching, repeatedly preaching the historic gospel, remembering their own past by developing a deep, rich, private prayer life, and desperately depending on the Holy Spirit.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to explore how pastors proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. The assumption of this study was that experienced preachers have learned important principles and methods involved in proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand. To address this purpose, the research identifies three main areas of focus. These areas are 1) an exegetical study of Mark 1:15, 2) the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church, and 3) how pastors proclaim the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society. To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do pastors describe the kingdom of God is at hand when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?
2. What challenges do pastors face when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?
3. What strategies do pastors use when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?
4. What outcomes do pastors desire when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?

### **Design of the Study**

This study followed a basic qualitative research design. Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, defines a general, basic qualitative study as “understanding the meaning people have constructed; that is,



how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.”<sup>511</sup>

Merriam identifies four characteristics of qualitative research: “The focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly description.”<sup>512</sup> As compared to the “precise, numerical” findings of quantitative research, the researcher followed a basic qualitative design because, according to Merriam, the findings of qualitative research are “comprehensive, holistic, expansive, and richly descriptive.”<sup>513</sup>

This study employed a basic qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data gathering. This qualitative method provided for the discovery of more comprehensive and descriptive data from participant perspectives in the narrow phenomena of proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies.<sup>514</sup>

### **Participant Sample Selection**

This study established criteria for purposeful sampling in order to “directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases.”<sup>515</sup> In order to gain the richest data, this study selected a unique sample based on participants

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<sup>511</sup> Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2016), 15.

<sup>512</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 15.

<sup>513</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 20.

<sup>514</sup> “The researcher is interested in understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved.” Merriam and Tisdell, 24.

<sup>515</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 97.

who exhibited exceptional knowledge and abilities in the phenomenon of interest.<sup>516</sup> Therefore, to gain data towards best practices from those with a depth of experiences with the challenges of proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies, participants self-reported at least ten years of experience of preaching full-time and had preached through the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, or on the topic of the kingdom of God.

To provide maximum variation of ideas, participants varied in age, in ministry setting (urban, suburban, metropolitan, university town, small town), in geographic location, in congregation size, and in the demographic make-up of the congregation.<sup>517</sup> In order to minimize variables beyond the focus of this research, only Reformed and theologically conservative male pastors who subscribe to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* were selected.

The final study was conducted through personal interviews with seven pastors who met the participant criteria and were identified through a network sampling technique.<sup>518</sup> They were invited to participate via an introductory email, followed by a formal invitation. All expressed interest and gave written informed consent to participate. In addition, each participant signed a “Research Participant Consent Form” to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants. The Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is “minimal risk” according to Seminary IRB guidelines.

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<sup>516</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 97.

<sup>517</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 98, 259.

<sup>518</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 98.

## *Sample Participant Invitation Letter*

To [interested potential interview participants]:

[Month], [00], 2022

As you may know, I have been working on a Doctor of Ministry at Covenant Theological Seminary for the past eight years. I am now beginning research for the dissertation and am eager for you to participate. My research topic concerns how pastors proclaim the Kingdom of God is at hand (c.f. Mk 1:15, Matt 4:17) to congregants living in a polarized, pluralistic society. I am pursuing a qualitative study, meaning I will be analyzing interviews where eight people discuss with me how they think about preaching the Kingdom of God is at hand in light of the polarized and pluralistic environment that exists in America today. I will then compare the interview information with published research on Reformed responses to pluralism, the one-kingdom two-kingdom debate, and an exegetical study of Mark 1:15.

This research requires participants who have at least ten years of experience in preaching, have taught on the topic of the Kingdom of God (e.g. – preached/taught through the Gospels of Matthew or Mark), and felt that their preaching the Kingdom of God is at hand resulted in hoped-for outcomes. I will interview those interested about their experiences related to preaching the Kingdom of God is at hand.

To complete my degree in a timely fashion, I want to conduct interviews and collect relevant document during June and July 2022. Relevant documents include anonymous copies of sermons that touch on potentially politically divisive issues. When I have finished the research, I will be eager to share my results and conclusions with you, if you are interested.

If you choose to participate with me, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Complete the enclosed consent form;
2. Complete a one-page participant questionnaire;
3. Discuss the research topic with me for 60-90 minutes in a recorded interview;
4. Allow me to study copies of anonymous, relevant documents;
5. Possibly review relevant sections of my written report to check for accuracy and completeness.

Participation is wholly voluntary, and participants are free to withdraw at any time. In order to provide participant anonymity, I will not report names with responses. Please be assured that any information that you provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will your name be reported along with your responses. Pseudonyms will be used in all written material in this study. Please contact me if you have any questions regarding this research. Thank you for your interest and consideration. Your assistance is crucial in helping me with this research. I appreciate your time very much! I will follow up in a couple days to ask for your decision about participating.

Sincerely,

Rev. Jonathan E. Whitley  
920-309-2282  
jonathanewhitley@gmail.com

## *Research Participant Informed Consent Form*

### **RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by Jonathan E. Whitley to investigate proclaiming the Kingdom of God is at hand to congregants living in a polarized, pluralistic society for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological Seminary. I understand that my participation

is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

- 1) The purpose of the research is to investigate how pastors proclaims the Kingdom of God is at hand to congregants living in a polarized, pluralistic society.
- 2) Potential benefits of the research may include offering greater clarity to pastors about how to thoughtfully and carefully preach the kingdom of God is at hand in a divisive and diverse society. Although there are no direct benefits for participants, I hope they will be encouraged through the experience of sharing their experiences with eager listeners and learners.
- 3) The research process will include eight participants who meet certain criteria and gathering data from them through audio recorded interviews.
- 4) Participants in this research will be interviewed for 60-90 minutes about their experiences relevant to the research topic.
- 5) Potential discomforts or stresses: recalling challenges related to the research topic may cause minimal discomfort or stress.
- 6) Potential risks: Minimal risks due to asking participants to reveal personal experiences relating to politically sensitive topics.
- 7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.
- 8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.
- 9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

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Printed Name and Signature of Researcher

Date

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Printed Name and Signature of Participant

Date

*Please sign both copies of this form. Keep one. Return the other to the researcher. Thank you.*

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to: Director Joel Hathaway, Doctor of Ministry; Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.
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## **Data Collection**

The primary data gathering tool for this study was semi-structured interviews. The open-ended nature of interview questions facilitates the ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues to explore them more thoroughly.<sup>519</sup> Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.<sup>520</sup>

The researcher interviewed seven pastors for approximately sixty to ninety minutes each. Prior to the interview, a brief description of the research topic along with a sampling of protocol questions was sent to each participant. Additionally, prior to the interview, participants completed a one-page questionnaire and shared with the researcher recent sermons relevant to the study. While all the sermons were analyzed for relevant data contributing to the study, some were referenced during the interview with the respective pastor as a point of reference. To accommodate participant schedules, the researcher traveled to meet the participants and, in some cases, utilized Zoom for the interviews. The researcher recorded the interviews using Zoom audio recording and a digital audio recorder. The researcher completed the data gathering over a three-week

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<sup>519</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 124–25.

<sup>520</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 297.

span. Directly after each interview, the researcher wrote field notes with descriptive and reflective observations on the interview time.

The interview protocol contained the following questions.

1. Tell me about a recent time when you proclaimed the kingdom of God is at hand (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:15) in a sermon, lesson, or lecture.
2. What challenges or barriers do you observe in proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand?
3. How would you describe your congregation's understanding of the kingdom of God is at hand?
4. What things influence your congregation's understanding of the kingdom of God is at hand?
5. What do you hope to be true of your congregation in 10-20 years as a result of your proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand?
6. If you were advising a young preacher to preach the kingdom of God is at hand, what would you want to tell him?

## **Data Analysis**

As soon as possible and always within one week of each interview, the researcher transcribed each interview using “Descript” software to provide an unedited transcript. The researcher then listened to the digital recording while editing the transcript for accuracy and adding collected field notes. This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.<sup>521</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 202–4.

When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were coded and analyzed using open coding and coding-trees.<sup>522</sup> The analysis focused on discovering and identifying (1) common themes, patterns, and categories across the variation of participants; and (2) congruence or discrepancy between the different groups of participants.<sup>523</sup>

### **Researcher Position**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.<sup>524</sup> The researcher acknowledges certain biases or subjectivities that may have had an impact on the study.<sup>525</sup> The researcher is an ordained teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church in America, subscribes to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, has been serving as an ordained pastor for sixteen years, has seven years of full-time preaching experience, and, like the participants, is a male. The researcher is a senior pastor of a medium-sized congregation located in a mid-sized city in the Midwest. The demographic make-up of the researcher's congregation is mostly middle class, Caucasian, and politically conservative.

The researcher interprets the Bible from a Reformed, theologically conservative perspective, as summarized in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. The researcher's "theoretical framework" is that all human beings are made by a Creator and are,

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<sup>522</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 204, 208.

<sup>523</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 206.

<sup>524</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 16.

<sup>525</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 16.

therefore, made in his image.<sup>526</sup> As such, in the researcher’s framework, all human beings are intrinsically valuable, dignified, and significant. Furthermore, the researcher holds that all human beings, descended from one man and one woman, are of one race, and are by nature rebellious against their Creator. Therefore, the researcher assumes that fundamentally all problems in the world – such as division and polarization – are ultimately products of the rebellion of human beings against their Creator. The researcher’s framework affirms that the ultimate hope and salvation for the human race is found only in and through the historical Jesus of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem, of whom the gospels of the Bible attest to. The researcher assumes that the entire Bible, including the Old and New Testaments, is inspired by the Creator Himself, and therefore, infallible, the only authority for faith and practice, without errors in its original manuscripts, and clear in all that it addresses. From this view, the researcher affirms that Jesus is the Wisdom of the Creator who, through the Bible, speaks into every area of life, society, and politics. As a corollary, the researcher is committed to preaching the Bible in an expository, “Christ-centered” manner. This framework may have influenced the researcher’s data analysis and findings. However, because the researcher’s theoretical framework is shared by the study participants, this might allow for better analysis of the participants’ experiences.

### **Study Limitations**

Due to limited time and resources, this study was limited to seven male participants. As previously stated, the participants were full-time preaching pastors of

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<sup>526</sup> Merriam and Tisdell, 85.



American congregations from a Reformed, theologically conservative tradition, and had at least ten years of preaching experience. Therefore, further research is needed to broaden the participant selection to include pastors of other theological viewpoints, other roles within the church, and other geographic settings beyond the United States. Some of the study's findings may be generalized to other theological, ecclesiastical, and geographic contexts. Readers who desire to generalize some of the particular aspects of these conclusions on American pastors proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies should test those aspects in their particular context. As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context. The results of this study may also have implications for other settings including organizations, and educational or theological institutions.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study is to explore how pastors proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. This chapter provides the findings of the seven pastoral interviews and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions. To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided the qualitative research.

1. How do pastors describe the kingdom of God is at hand when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?
2. What challenges do pastors face when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?
3. What strategies do pastors use when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?
4. What outcomes do pastors desire when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?

### **Introductions to Participants and Context**

The researcher selected seven senior pastors to participate in this study. All seven participants have at least ten years' experience as a full-time preacher, serve in churches in the United States that are Reformed, Presbyterian, and evangelical, and have preached through the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Matthew, or the topic of the kingdom of God. All the pastors interviewed subscribe to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. All names and identifiable participant information have been changed to protect identities.

Pastor Larry serves as the senior pastor of a large congregation in a mid-sized city in the Southeast. He has served in this role for twenty-three years. He has been preaching full-time for forty-two years. Demographically, his congregation is multi-generational, politically conservative, and middle to upper middle class.

Pastor Gus serves as the senior pastor of a mid-sized congregation in a large city in the East. He has served in this role for nine years and has over thirteen years full-time preaching experience. His congregation is middle class, and the majority are what he described as politically “left of center.”

Pastor Tim serves as the senior pastor of a large multi-campus congregation in a large city in the Southeast. He has served in this role for ten years and has been preaching full-time for twenty-three years. He preaches at the “flagship” congregation which he described as “well-to-do to middle class,” “mostly nuclear families,” and “intergenerational.”

Pastor Bill serves as the senior pastor of a large congregation in a small city in the Midwest. Although he has served this congregation for only two months, he previously served for fifteen years as the senior pastor of a congregation in the Southeast. He also has fifteen years full-time preaching experience. He described the demographic make-up of his previous church as “entirely conservative Republicans and Libertarians.” He described his current church as “mixed” with Democrats, Republicans, and Libertarians.

Pastor Jeff serves as the senior pastor of a large congregation in a suburb of a large city in the Midwest. He has been serving in this role and preaching full-time for twenty-one years. He describes the demographic make-up of his congregation as “middle to upper-middle class,” “suburban,” and “mostly Republican or conservative politically.”

Pastor Bob serves as the senior pastor of a large congregation in a small city in the Northwest. He has been serving and preaching full-time for forty-five years. He described the demographic make-up of his congregation as “conservative,” “ethnically diverse,” and “multi-generational.” Bob described himself as a “postmillennialist.”

Pastor Jim serves as the senior pastor of a large congregation in a mid-sized city in the Midwest. He has served in this role for eight years. He has been preaching full-time for twenty-six years. He described the demographic make-up of his congregation as “upper middle class,” “90 percent white,” “90 percent Republican.”

### **Describing the Kingdom of God is At Hand**

The first research question sought to determine “How pastors describe the kingdom of God is at hand when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?” The pastors’ responses can be divided into four descriptive categories: a Jesus kingdom, a dynamic kingdom, an “already” kingdom, and a “not yet” kingdom.

#### *A Jesus Kingdom*

All the pastors shared that the kingdom of God is a kingdom that belongs to Jesus. When describing the kingdom of God, most pastors described it as “the rule and reign of Jesus.” Pastor Jim described the kingdom of God as “the rule of Christ in your heart.” Similarly, Pastor Jeff described the kingdom of God as “a spiritual, redemptive kingdom” that “will ultimately be a physical kingdom in the new heavens and new earth.” However, two pastors described the kingdom in more expansive terms. Pastor Gus expressed concern that the kingdom of God “can be reduced to what Christ is doing in our hearts.”

While he agreed with this viewpoint, he added, “I also think there’s more for us to explore in terms of what it looks like for us to be a kingdom people.” Pastor Bob shared a similar response. He believes that the kingdom of God, which he described as “the rule and realm of the Lord Jesus Christ,” was first established here on earth when Jesus ascended into heaven over 2000 years ago. He stated, “Christ is ruling in principle, definitively now, and he wields an iron rod, and he’s in the process of bringing all the nations into submission.” Once it is fully established here on earth, according to Bob, “then Christ will come.”

### *A Dynamic Kingdom*

Most pastors described a dynamic nature to the kingdom of God using phrases like “the kingdom grows,” “the kingdom expands,” and “the kingdom advances.” Many explained that the dynamic nature of the kingdom began at Jesus’ first coming. Pastor Jim expressed the dynamic nature of the kingdom when he said, “[Jesus] was establishing his rule on the earth, which would be an expansion, because he tells the parables of a kingdom that starts as a seed and grows.” Pastor Larry agreed stating, “The kingdom expands the rule and reign of Christ throughout society, throughout culture.”

Some pastors described the growth or expansion of the kingdom as a slow process. Pastor Jeff said, “This kingdom building enterprise is very slow, deliberate. It’s going to happen, but we, in our lifetime, may not see a big, wider level advance that we might be expecting.” Pastor Bob agreed when he said that it is “a process involving millennia.” Bob likened it to walking from the plains to the mountains. Unlike a space shuttle that launches upward every second, Bob explained, “The advance of the kingdom

is more like walking from Kansas to the continental divide. You're walking through the foothills and there's a good bit of up and then a good bit of down and then up and down."

Many pastors expressed that the kingdom expands through the ministry of the Church. Pastor Larry said, "The church is actually creating the expansion of the kingdom by the discipleship of believers who now in discipleship learn, how do I do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." Pastor Bob added, "The Christians go out into the kingdom and establish and firm up and develop the kingdom." Pastor Gus agreed with Larry and Bob, stating, "The practices of God's people, the practices of the church, is one of the ways that God advances the kingdom." However, Gus wanted to "reserve room" for other ways that God may advance the kingdom. He suggested that sometimes "God providentially advances his kingdom without any perceivable mediation or without any discernable particular actions of the church."

A few pastors expressed that the kingdom expands specifically, and uniquely, because of preaching the gospel. Pastor Jeff said, "The way the kingdom of God is expanded is through the preaching of the gospel." In fact, he stated, "I'm not actually growing the kingdom of Christ by engaging the culture." He added a caveat to this statement, stating, "My commission is to preach the gospel and make disciples. It's not to transform the culture. It's just so happens that transformed people, though, will have an impact on the culture, generally speaking." However, two pastors disagreed with the unique role of preaching the gospel as the means of kingdom expansion. Pastor Jim said, "I don't think any change is going to happen just by mere preaching." Pastor Larry agreed when he stated whenever a person does all that they do "to the glory of God—in

your marriage, your family, your business, your citizenship, your neighborhood—you are expanding the kingdom.”

A couple pastors emphasized the role of the Holy Spirit in the advancement of the kingdom of God. Pastor Jim said, “Where the Spirit moves, the kingdom advances.” Pastor Bob agreed, stating, “The Holy Spirit is the one who gives gifts, who enables people to say and do the right thing at the right time, who empowers them to make a great advance.”

Most pastors expressed that the dynamic nature of the kingdom can be evidenced or “manifested.” Pastor Jeff expressed that the “witness” of the gospel is evidence of kingdom expansion. He said, “A strong gospel witness is a real good indicator that the kingdom is advancing.” But he clarified that “a strong gospel witness” is not necessarily tied to “how many born again people are there.” He stated, “I would assume there’s conversions at that point, but that can lag.” However, two pastors described evidence of kingdom expansion specifically in terms of conversions. Pastor Bill communicated this perspective when he said, “Every time we see a sinner come to faith in Jesus, we see the kingdom of God being ushered in.” Pastor Jim agreed, stating that the kingdom expands “every time someone believes the gospel and submits to the rule of Christ.”

### *An “Already” Kingdom*

Most pastors expressed that the kingdom of God is an “already” or “at hand” kingdom. Many pastors described this by stating that the kingdom of God is “already and not yet.” Pastor Bob articulated the “already and not yet” perspective when he said, “The kingdom is established in principle, and we long for the day when we see the fruit of it established and honored and recognized in every place.” Similarly, Pastor Bill described

the “already and not yet” of the kingdom of God as “hope for today, but eternal hope for the future.”

When describing the “already” or “at hand” nature of the kingdom, many pastors described it as a kingdom that is “here” or “available.” Pastor Jim expressed this view when he said, “The king is here, and he’s establishing his kingdom.” Pastor Larry agreed, stating, “Wherever the king is, you’ve got the kingdom.” He added that the ascended king is still “here” in his “indwelt body,” which is the church. Pastor Bill said that the kingdom is “available.” He said, “God gives us Jesus, and we have the opportunity to give Jesus to others.”

Some pastors described the “already” nature of the kingdom in terms of the work that God is doing in the lives of his people. Pastor Tim said, “[Jesus] is already starting to make all things new and that begins with his people and with the way that we are able to serve the world and our neighbors in his name.” Pastor Jeff agreed, stating, “The already is that people can be born again.” Pastor Gus expressed something similar when he described the kingdom of God is at hand as “the inbreaking of the rule and reign of Christ in the hearts, relationships, and actions of God’s people.”

Many pastors described the church as having a significant role in the “already” kingdom. Pastor Larry articulated this view when he described the church as “the engine of the kingdom powered by the Holy Spirit.” Pastor Bob said something similar, stating, “The church is at the center of the kingdom.” Bob stated that it is the church’s responsibility to proclaim the fact that Jesus was “crowned king 2000 years ago.” He said the church will “get the nations to acknowledge” that reality “in and through that proclamation.” Pastor Tim agreed, calling the church “an outpost” called “to colonize



communities in a way that gives life instead of take life from the community.” He added, “The church is both an equipping agency and a sending agency for the kingdom of God.” Pastor Larry agreed, stating “The church can best be seen as the embassy of the kingdom or the equipping center of the kingdom.”

Furthermore, many pastors made a distinction between the church and the “already” kingdom. Pastor Larry said, “While the church is part of the kingdom, it is not equal to the kingdom, nor is the kingdom equal to or restricted to the church itself.” He said that the church is meant to “equip” believers so that they know how to be “part of the kingdom of God” and to be “a testimony and an expansion of the kingdom of God into this world.” Pastor Gus agreed, stating, “The church is a subset of the bigger thing called the kingdom. And the kingdom is as wide as the redeemed creation.”

However, one pastor disagreed with this distinction. Pastor Tim said the distinction between the church and the kingdom is “minimal.” He said, “The church is meant to be involved, and engaged with, and an ambassador of, all the kingdom purposes of God.” Nevertheless, Pastor Larry cautioned against the church “adopting a mission of cultural transformation.” He stated, “Whatever the church makes its functional mission will control its message.” According to Larry, if the church makes cultural transformation or city transformation its mission, then it’s only a matter of time before the church begins to exercise “cultural accommodation” in the name of contextualization. Instead, Larry described a “focused mission” of making disciples and a “comprehensive message” of teaching the whole counsel of God. In this mission, Larry said, “The church is actually creating the expansion of the kingdom by the discipleship of believers who now in discipleship learn how to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.”

## *A “Not Yet” Kingdom*

Most pastors described the kingdom of God is at hand as a “not yet” or future kingdom. Pastor Bob said, “We long for the day when we see the fruit of [the kingdom] established and honored and recognized in every place.” Bob described the “fruit” of the kingdom that has “not yet” been realized as “universal peace and harmony” that will come through “the great mortification or subduing of sin,” “the formal recognition of the Lordship of Jesus Christ,” and “the establishment of another Christendom.” In Bob’s view, once this happens, “then Christ will come.” Similarly, Pastor Tim said, “There’s still that ‘not yet’ factor that sin still exists in the world, that resistance to God’s kingdom purposes and priorities still exist.” Pastor Gus agreed, stating, “All of the creation is under the domain of God, but it will be brought further under his domain and the resistance will be dealt with and handled.”

### *Summary of Describing the Kingdom of God is At Hand*

The first research question sought to determine “How pastors describe the kingdom of God is at hand when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies.” Four descriptive categories were referenced. The first descriptive category was that the kingdom of God at hand is a Jesus kingdom. Most pastors said that the kingdom of God is “the rule and reign of Jesus.” The second descriptive category was that the kingdom of God at hand is a dynamic kingdom. Most pastors described the kingdom of God using terms such as “expands,” “advances,” or “grows.” Many described the expansion of the kingdom as being directly related to the proclamation of the gospel. The third descriptive category shared by pastors was that the kingdom of God at hand is an “already” kingdom. Many pastors shared extensively about

the “already” or “at hand” nature of the kingdom of God as a present reality that provides “hope for today” because Jesus and his kingdom is “here” and “available.” Many pastors emphasized the distinct role of the church in the “already” kingdom, describing the church as “an outpost,” an “equipping” and “sending agency,” “at the center of the kingdom,” and “the engine of the kingdom.” The final descriptive category shared by pastors was that the kingdom of God at hand is a “not yet” kingdom. Many pastors described the “not yet” nature of the kingdom of God as the “great mortification or subduing of sin” and the “formal recognition of the lordship of Jesus Christ.” One pastor described it as the “fruit” of the kingdom that will be evidenced with the “establishment of another Christendom.”

### **Challenges of Proclaiming the Kingdom of God is At Hand**

The second research question asked, “What challenges do pastors face when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?” Participant responses can be divided into two main categories: theological challenges and cultural challenges. Four themes emerged.

#### *Theological Challenges*

Most of the pastors identified theological challenges to proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. Four theologically challenging themes emerged during the interview process.

## **The Lingo**

Several pastors identified the concept of the kingdom of God as their first big challenge. Pastor Jeff said, “The lingo itself is a barrier conceptually” because “the concept is a little bit foreign to people.” Pastor Jim agreed saying, “I don’t think people really understand what the kingdom of God is.” Pastor Larry suggested that in his context this challenge is due to “the dispensational adulteration” that says the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven are “two different things.”

## **The Cultural Transformation Temptation**

When it comes to proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies, a couple of pastors identified the challenge of staying on mission despite unfavorable outcomes. Pastor Jeff said, “Sometimes Christians can feel like if things in the world are going poorly, then the church must not be doing its job.” He said that if the church does not seem to have a cultural “impact,” it can foster a “frustration with the church” that leads some to adopt “a cultural transformation idea” that says, “I’ve got to jump into this social cause.” He described cultural transformation as the idea of “a cultural redemption that happens because Christianity is on the scene.” While he expressed a desire to see the culture transformed, he did not think this should be the “main thing” for the church. He said that when a church does this it “gets off course, and we’re not preaching the gospel anymore.” For Jeff, this “inevitably” results in getting “softer on sin as the real problem every person has with God.” He commented, “If the mission becomes too wide, you’ll necessarily get distracted from the main thing we have to offer.”

Pastor Larry observed this challenge as well. He summarized it as “making a kingdom consequence of cultural transformation actually the mission of the church.” His concern is that when a church makes cultural transformation the mission of the church “then it’s only a matter of time” until the church begins to exercise what he called “cultural accommodation.” He said, “Whatever the church makes its functional mission will eventually control its message.”

### **Skepticism of Postmillennial Optimism**

As a pastor who preaches from a postmillennial assumption, Pastor Bob identified two postmillennial challenges. The first is what he called “the assumption of civilization decline.” As a postmillennialist, Bob believes in a “fundamentally optimistic view of church history and human history” where over time “things are getting better and better.” However, he faces a challenge when presenting this idea because, as he said, “It’s very natural and very easy for us to feel like the world’s falling apart.” He said this is due to “a paradigm” of civilization decline “that seems instinctively right to a lot of people.” Bob said when people hear him preach the kingdom of God is at hand and say, “Things are getting better, and this is glorious,” the initial reaction is “What drugs are you on?”

A second postmillennial challenge Bob faces is the immaturity of the church historically. This is a particular challenge due to his postmillennial assumption that the church will grow in formal authority and recognition in the world. He described “those periods in history where the church emerged from a great crisis victorious and promptly proved that they weren’t ready for primetime.” As examples, he cited the conversion of Constantine and the Roman Empire in the early fourth century and “the success of the Puritan revolution in the seventeenth century in England.” He said these are examples of

instances “where paganism collapsed before the Christian church had the requisite maturity to govern with the kind of full maturity that we ought to have had.”

Opposed to Bob’s “fundamentally optimistic” view, Pastor Jeff presented a less than optimistic view of the church’s role in society. He said, “I see us being less able to have a voice in the public sphere.” Instead of the church growing in formal authority and recognition, Jeff believes that the teaching of the church will “be less and less tolerated.”

### **Performative Diversity**

A couple of pastors identified the theological challenge of what Pastor Gus called “performative diversity.” Gus said that some Christians are “settling for the optics of cross-cultural” ministry. He described this as being “satisfied” with “performative diversity” that does things like having diverse leaders in a church that does not have “the substance of cross-cultural life.” Pastor Tim described the problem similarly, saying, “I think a lot of Christians embrace the idea of diversity without understanding the costs and the adjustments required by diverse community.” He noted that “the gospel of the kingdom calls us to bend for our neighbor,” but “it’s hardwired into the human heart to expect everyone else to bend for us.”

### *Cultural Challenges*

Most of the pastors identified cultural challenges that they face when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies.

## **Confusion**

When proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand, several pastors identified several types of confusion. “There’s confusion,” said Pastor Bill, “confusion about morality, confusion about truth, confusion about our own identity.” Pastor Jeff said some are “confused” about the mission of the church. Pastor Gus said, “Sometimes our people confuse contextualization with capitulation.”

Gus described the challenge of confusing contextualization with capitulation as what starts out as a desire to be in relationship with people who are different that can “drift into” an avoidance of confronting sin and even an acceptance of sin. He said that after church members start building relationships with people who are different, “They so don’t want to clash with them.” To avoid “a confrontation with them,” he said, they would rather “trim and edit the faith than to go through the discomfort of those hard conversations and possibly the rupturing of some of those relationships.”

Gus believes this confusing “drift” is a result of two factors: 1) “plain old fear of man,” and 2) taking “clear black-and-white Christian teaching and belief over the ages and around the globe” and “making it gray.” Gus said the gray “comes in the form of half-truths” and “bringing into question things that have been historically unquestioned by Christians.” He concluded, “And when you make it gray, it’s easier to ignore.” Gus believes “all of this is a function of our therapeutic culture” that is “all about making people feel good immediately and not experience feelings of discomfort or disorientation.” According to Gus, “The faith is being given a distinctly therapeutic cast” that says, “If you make me feel bad, you’re being abusive.” To him all of this contributes to the cultural challenge that confuses contextualization with capitulation.

Pastor Larry said something similar. He observes the barrier of “cultural accommodation in the name of contextualization.” He described contextualization as “speaking in terms that the culture will understand.” However, cultural accommodation in the name of accommodation is “speaking in terms that the culture demands.” He described what begins as “a genuine desire to change the culture of the city” that desires “to get a seat at the table with the cultural transformers.” But in his opinion, to get that seat, the church must adjust her message and back off of both “the demands and the promises of transformational blessings, such as regeneration and sanctification.”

### **Political Partisanship**

Some pastors identified the cultural challenge of “political partisanship.” Pastor Tim said, “Political partisanship is probably the greatest distraction to the gospel in just about any Western hemisphere church these days.” Describing this challenge, he said, “The cable news channels and social media get our people for twenty hours a week, and we get them for an hour a week.” He concluded that this is due to “a discipleship imbalance where so many of the people in our pews are discipled by a pundit.” Instead of looking to Jesus and the Bible, he believes they “look to a pundit to disciple them, to think for them, to orient their perspectives.” Similarly, Pastor Jim described this problem in this way, “We say Jesus is king, but we watch Fox News more than we pay attention to Scripture.” In his congregation, he observed that for many, “Republican politics trumps the kingdom of God.”



## **A Radically Individual Age**

Many of the pastors interviewed identified the cultural challenge of “a radically individual age.” Pastor Jeff said, “It’s such a radically individual age that we’re living in.” Rather than thinking beyond oneself, Jeff said, “It’s all about what you feel like, what you think, how you express yourself.” Stating the challenge similarly, Pastor Tim said, “Americanism is very individualistic and consumeristic.” Or, as Pastor Jim put it, “The chief value of America is my personal freedom and choice.” He described this as “a cultural narrative that’s anti the rule of God” and says, “You can’t tell me what I can’t do.”

Pastor Bill described this challenge as a “love of autonomy” that says, “We do not want to submit ourselves to anyone or to any rule apart from or outside of ourselves.” Jim described this idea as “my rule versus his.” Jim said, “We have many things competing for our affection, our loyalties, for who or what will rule our hearts.” Jim concluded, “Our sin nature struggles against” the message that the kingdom of God is at hand.

## **Intolerance of Christian Teaching**

One pastor identified “intolerance of Christian teaching” as a cultural challenge. Pastor Jeff described the cultural pressures of “the intolerance of Christian teaching.” In addition to intolerance of biblical teaching, Jeff believes that the challenge is the world’s “promoting and pushing of their values.” As an example, he referred to public school teachers who say, “Christian parents are abusing their kids,” if they keep their kids from learning certain cultural values. He summarized the challenge saying, “It’s not just the intolerance of our views; it’s in replacing them with their values.”

### *Summary of Challenges to Proclaiming the Kingdom of God is At Hand*

The second research question asked, “What challenges do pastors face when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies.” Pastors shared responses in two categories: theological challenges and cultural challenges. There were four theological challenges. The first theological challenge was “the lingo itself.” As one pastor shared, “I don’t think people really understand what the kingdom of God is.” The second theological challenge was the “cultural transformation” temptation. Some pastors shared a concern that the church is pressured to get “off course” when Christians want more immediate change in the world and push to adopt a “cultural transformation” mission. Some pastors cautioned that whatever serves as the “functional mission” of the church “will eventually control its message” and could lead to becoming “softer on sin as the real problem every person has.” The third theological challenge was skepticism of his postmillennial optimism. One pastor shared that overall he believes things are getting better in the world for the church. However, he acknowledged the challenge of communicating that message to his congregation as they look around the world and see things getting worse and worse. One pastor did not share this optimism and shared that he believes the church will be less and less tolerated by the world. The final theological challenge shared by pastors was “performative diversity.” This was the idea that some churches will settle for the “optics” of cross-cultural life without the “substance” of it. As one pastor shared, the human heart that is “hardwired” toward self makes this difficult.

There were four cultural challenges shared by pastors. The first cultural challenge was “confusion.” As one pastor shared, people are confused about morality, truth, and

identity. Other pastors shared how some people are “confusing contextualization with capitulation” and are tempted to “drift” toward “cultural accommodation.” The second cultural challenge shared by pastors was “political partisanship.” One pastor called this “the greatest distraction to the gospel” in the West. Pastors shared about “a discipleship imbalance” where many pay attention to “a pundit” or “Fox News” more than to Jesus and the Scriptures. The third cultural challenge shared by pastors was “a radically individual age.” As one pastor said, “The chief value of America is my personal freedom and choice.” This challenge was described as “my rule versus his.” The final cultural challenge shared by one pastor was “intolerance of Christian teaching.” This challenge is not only an intolerance of biblical teaching, but a “promoting and pushing” of worldly values “replacing” Christian values in the world.

### **Strategies to Proclaiming the Kingdom of God is At Hand**

The third research question asked, “What strategies do pastors use when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?” Responses shared by the pastors can be divided into two categories: homiletic strategies and ministry strategies.

#### *Homiletic Strategies*

One category of response shared by pastors related to homiletic, formal communication strategies. Five types of homiletic strategies were shared by most of the pastors interviewed: 1) “address all the misunderstandings,” 2) counter “false narratives,” 3) “push into the imaginative,” 4) “don’t forget repentance,” and 5) with humility.

### **Addressing Misunderstandings**

The first type of homiletic strategy shared by many pastors was the importance of addressing potential misunderstandings about the concept the kingdom of God is at hand. Pastor Bob said, “When Jesus says the kingdom is at hand, there were all kinds of misunderstandings about what that kingdom entailed. And it’s our job to address all the misunderstandings straight up.” Pastor Larry said that he works to “draw out distinctions for people in the pew” using illustrations and applications that help people grasp the kingdom of God and dispel their potential theological misunderstandings.

### **Countering False Narratives**

The second type of homiletic strategy shared by several pastors was that of countering false narratives that church members may believe or hear in the world. In order to equip his congregation to counter these false narratives, Pastor Gus said that “in a number of sermons,” he will address the narrative saying, “You hear this out in the world, but here’s the reality.” For example, in responding to the false narrative that the church is invalid due to its historic failures on the issue of slavery, one of his “go to” countering strategies is “the communal hermeneutic of the global and historic church.” He said, “If you look at the global and historic church’s relationship to slavery, I think what you see is a redemptive trajectory.”

Similarly, Pastor Bob shared how he counters “the assumption of civilization decline” narrative. He said, “The idea of decline—things are getting worse and worse and worse—is an intellectual construct, an intellectual idea that gets handed on. It’s a tradition.” He then went on to counter this narrative in two ways.

First, he used a comparative analogy of launching a space shuttle and walking from the plains to the mountains. He said, “What I tell people is that the progress of the kingdom of God is not like launching the space shuttle,” where “every day and every second and every way, everything is getting better, and you’re getting higher and higher.” Rather, he said, “The advance of the kingdom is more like walking from Kansas to the continental divide. You’re walking through the foothills and there’s a good bit of up and then a good bit of down and then up and down.” In the same way as history progresses, he added, “There might be a period where you spend 150 years falling apart.”

Second, he encouraged his congregation to “look at things in 500-year increments” instead of 5-year increments. He asked, “Would you rather be alive today or in 1522? Would you rather be alive in 1522 or in 1022?” He said this helps his people see that there has been development and progress. Compared to 522, Christianity is “a true global religion” with “deep roots on every continent, except for Antarctica.”

### **Pushing into the Imaginative**

A third type of homiletic strategy shared by some pastors was the role of the “imaginative” in explaining the kingdom of God is at hand. Pastor Gus said, “I’ve tried to capture my people’s imagination and say, ‘The life of the kingdom to come, what would it look like for more of that kingdom to come, the not yet, to make its way into the already, the right now?’” Gus said he tries to push his congregation “into the imaginative” to think both protologically (i.e., “what it was intended to be”) and eschatologically (i.e., “what it was meant to grow into”). When proclaiming the kingdom, he wants “to think imaginatively and boldly about what it could look like for this congregation to get a sense of the kingdom.” Gus used stories, illustrations, and the

parables in the gospels to give “expression to the different facets of life in the kingdom” and to help his congregation get “a sense of what the kingdom is about.” Pastor Tim agreed with Gus, stating, “What we want to do is stimulate and motivate the Christian imagination to think in less binary terms about their faith and the rest of their life.” He said, “Convince people that what you’re saying is true. Tell them stories of transformation. Show them, don’t just tell them.”

### **Remembering Repentance**

A fourth homiletic strategy was the importance of repentance as part of the proclamation that the kingdom of God is at hand. Pastor Jim said, “Don’t forget repentance in all this, which means, ‘I’ve actually got to change my mind about things.’” Pastor Jeff agreed, stating, “We’ve got to get this ‘repent and believe the gospel’ part right. You can screw up your explanation of the particulars of the kingdom. You cannot screw up what it means to turn from your sins and unto Christ.”

While most of the pastors agreed with this emphasis, Pastor Gus encouraged “a more expansive view” of repentance. He was concerned about “a very reductionistic” view of repentance that’s “pietistically oriented” or focused only on “individual sins.” Gus commented that repentance ought to include “corporate dynamics” and “social failures.” He stated, “As much as we’re avoiding repentance, we are undermining our ability to live into the coming kingdom.”

### **With Humility**

A final homiletic strategy shared by some pastors is the importance of proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand with humility. Pastor Jim said, “I have to be

humble enough to say, ‘I don’t know everything.’” He referenced the apostles who “got it wrong before the ascension” of Jesus, and he wondered about “how much we get right and maybe how much we get wrong.” Pastor Gus said, “I always try to be spiraling closer toward what is true, and if I discover that there are things I’m missing or I’m not quite clearly articulating, to be ready to improve it, to correct it, whatever that may be.”

Similarly, Pastor Bob encouraged proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand “charitably” and “in a way that doesn’t bind anybody’s conscience.” He said, “I don’t think we should be belligerent or bellicose about this issue. And we should be able to have friendships across eschatological differences.”

### *Ministry Strategies*

The second category of strategies was ministry strategies. Four ministry strategies were shared: 1) preaching as the “central engine” of kingdom advancement, 2) worship as the “central activity” of kingdom people, 3) encouraging a “kingdom mindset,” and 4) establishing satellite kingdom ministries.

#### **The Central Engine of Kingdom Advancement**

Many pastors expressed the priority of preaching as a primary ministry strategy for proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to their congregations. Pastor Bob said, “The central engine of gospel advance needs to be preaching to people.” Pastor Jeff agreed, stating, “The way the kingdom of God is expanded is through the preaching of the gospel.” Bob also spoke of an element of preaching with faith in what the Bible says even if one looks around and what one sees says something else. When he started preaching the kingdom of God is at hand to his church forty-five years ago, he said, “I

was preaching what I could see with my eyes in the text but which I could not see with my eyes in our town.” But now he is seeing the fruit of his labor. He said, “After basically a generation of preaching and teaching this way, I’m starting to see with my eyes the kinds of things that we’ve been talking about.”

Many pastors also expressed the importance of regularly preaching on the kingdom. Pastor Bob stated, “This subject of the kingdom can’t be considered as a secondary or a tertiary issue.” Pastor Jeff said, “I’m in Genesis, and I would argue that’s what I’m still doing, is preaching the kingdom of God.” Pastor Jim agreed when he said that the Scriptures “give you plenty of opportunity to talk about the kingdom,” regardless of what book the pastor is preaching from. Similarly, Bob expressed that a kingdom demeanor or attitude is “pervasive everywhere else in all” that he preaches. Jim added that he sees the value in preaching the kingdom of God is at hand at least once a year, which for him is on Palm Sunday. He said, “[The kingdom] needs to be preached several times a year.”

### **The Central Activity of Kingdom People**

Some pastors responded that the “central activity” of a kingdom people is corporate worship. Pastor Jeff expressed that “the worship service on Sunday morning” is the central activity of the church. He said all other “activities of the church become satellites around that central activity of worship.” He stated, “The picture that the church sets in its patterns of liturgy and worship” will “necessarily have an impact on a person’s personal life” and “help somebody think kingdom-wise.” Pastor Gus called corporate worship “the center of the bullseye” of all that they do as a church. He said, “That’s our high point; that’s our orienting point as God’s people.”



Several pastors responded that their liturgy is a primary influence on their congregations' understanding of the kingdom. When asked what things influence his congregations understanding that the kingdom of God is at hand, Pastor Jeff said, "No doubt, the number one thing is our liturgy." For example, he said that during their Offertory Prayer, he "will oftentimes ask God to expand his kingdom on the basis of these gifts." Their liturgy, he said, "is steeped with equipping in order to go out and spread." Pastor Bill described what he called "kingdom-minded prayers." Describing this he said, "When I pray on Sunday mornings, I pray that we would be the salt and light that we're called to be. I actually pray, 'Lord, help us to storm the gates of hell.'"

### **Encouraging a Kingdom Mindset**

Many pastors described the ministry strategy of encouraging their congregation toward a "kingdom mindset." Pastor Tim stated, "We encourage people toward a kingdom mindset." He said, "We, at a snail's pace, try to disciple our people to think of the church more in terms of family and more in terms of an outpost for mission and service to the city." Pastor Bill shared that he encourages his congregation to see disagreeable things in culture or politics as a "call to prayer" because, as he said, "We don't put our hope in politics." Instead, he said, "We need to rest and rely and rejoice in Christ as we pray for our neighbors." Bill said this is part of the way the church does battle in the world. He said, "We battle in prayer, and we battle in compassion, and we battle with gentleness. But at the same time, we battle with truth." Similarly, Pastor Larry said, "We get the opportunity, by God's grace, to bring people into [the kingdom of God] and then we get the opportunity to nurture them and sent them out for the sake of the king, as ambassadors of that kingdom."

Another illustration of this strategy is that all but one pastor used the word “kingdom” as an adjective to describe a biblical worldview, biblical ethics, or biblical purposes. For example, pastors referred to this as “kingdom-thinking,” “personal kingdom ethic,” “kingdom values,” “kingdom church,” “kingdom ministries,” “kingdom purposes,” “kingdom perspective,” “kingdom people,” “kingdom promises,” “kingdom minded,” “kingdom agents,” “kingdom outposts,” “kingdom living,” “kingdom gospel witness,” “kingdom building enterprise,” “kingdom language,” “kingdom expansion,” “kingdom growth,” “kingdom lens,” and “kingdom motivation.”

### **Establishing Satellite Kingdom Ministries**

Many pastors shared the ministry strategy of establishing satellite kingdom ministries. Pastor Jeff said, “Your activities of the church become satellites around that central activity of worship.” Pastor Gus agreed, referring to the ministries of the church as a target. “The center of the bullseye is Sunday morning worship,” he said, “then you go out to our community groups, our service opportunities, the official church activities that we take up as a community.” He then said that “the outer layer” is “all the connections that our people are making with their neighbors.” He illustrated this strategy when he described their “monthly neighborhood parties” where neighbors can “experience welcome, and fun, and friendship, and the anticipatory joy of the kingdom.”

A “satellite” kingdom ministry strategy shared by many pastors was church planting. Pastor Bill called this strategy “planting kingdom outposts.” He said, “The idea of taking the kingdom out and building the kingdom of Jesus is church planting.” Pastor Jeff agreed, stating, “Most of our mission efforts are in church planting because we think the way the kingdom of God is expanded is through the preaching of the gospel.”

Similarly, Pastor Tim said church planting is part of their “outward facing ministries,” which also includes engagement and support for the underserved communities, faith and work integration, and “public faith” or “helping people out themselves as Christian in meaningful, winsome, neighbor-loving ways in the places where they live, work, and play.” He said these “outward facing ministries” are part of their “kingdom model of discipleship” that shepherds “people to get engaged with what the king is up to in the world.”

Another “satellite” kingdom ministry mentioned is establishing Christian schools. Pastor Jeff expressed the purpose of this strategy when he shared that the whole point of their Christian school is to “strengthen the church” with Christians who are “really, really equipped to propagate another level of disciples,” whom he hopes will transform the culture and maintain a “strong Christian witness that can bear up under persecution.” He shared that he hopes this will lead to having “a strong Christian church,” which is the “best thing we can do for the culture.” Pastor Bob illustrated his agreement with this strategy when he stated, “Approximately 35 percent of all the school-aged children in Smallville are receiving a private Christian education.” He added that they are only “15 percentage points away from government education becoming the minority form of education” in their city.

### *Summary of Strategies of Proclaiming the Kingdom of God is At Hand*

The third research question investigated the strategies pastors use when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. The pastors interviewed shared responses that were divided into two overarching categories: homiletic strategies and ministry strategies. There were five types of homiletic

strategies shared by pastors. The first type of homiletic strategy shared by pastors was to “address all the misunderstandings.” As one pastor said, “It’s our job to address all misunderstandings straight up.” The second type of homiletic strategy shared by pastors was to counter “false narratives.” One pastor said that “in a number of sermons” he will address false narrative by saying “You hear this out in the world, but here’s the reality.” The third type of homiletic strategy shared by pastors was to “push” people “into the imaginative.” One pastor does this by asking “What would it look like for more of that kingdom to come, to not yet, to make its way into the already, the right now?” One pastor shared that it is important to “show them, don’t just tell them” what the kingdom is like. The fourth type of homiletic strategy shared by pastors was the importance of preaching repentance. As one pastor shared, “Don’t forget repentance in all of this.” Or as another pastor shared, “We’ve got to get this ‘repent and believe the gospel’ part right.” The final type of homiletic strategy shared by pastors was the importance of proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand with humility. As one pastor shared, “I have to be humble enough to say, ‘I don’t know everything.’”

There were four types of ministry strategies shared by pastors. The first type of ministry strategy shared by pastors was preaching as “the central engine” of kingdom advancement. As one pastor shared, “The central engine of gospel advance needs to be preaching to people,” because, as another pastor shared, “The way the kingdom of God is expanded is through the preaching of the gospel.” A second type of ministry strategy shared by pastors was corporate worship as the “central activity” or “the center of the bullseye” of kingdom people. Correlating to this was the importance of “kingdom-minded” liturgy as a key influence on the congregation’s understanding of that the

kingdom of God is at hand. A third type of ministry strategy shared by pastors was encouraging a “kingdom mindset” among their congregations. This includes encouraging church members to envision themselves as being “equipped” and “sent out” into the world as “ambassadors” of the king. A final type of ministry strategy shared by pastors was establishing “satellite” kingdom ministries, which is everything else the church does besides corporate worship. Examples of “satellite” ministries included church planting and establishing Christian schools.

### **Outcomes of Proclaiming the Kingdom of God is At Hand**

The final research question uncovered what outcomes the pastors desired when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. Seven types of outcomes desired were shared by the pastors interviewed: 1) “repent and believe the gospel,” 2) “heralds fanning out,” 3) “less binary,” 4) “life-giving presence,” 5) “live out kingdom values,” 6) “planting kingdom outposts,” and 7) “increasingly known and celebrated.”

#### *Repent and Believe the Gospel*

Most shared that they hoped to see people “repent and believe the gospel” as a result of their proclamation that the kingdom of God is at hand. Pastor Jeff expressed this desired outcome when he said, “So you have to repent of your sins and believe the gospel.” Commenting about Mark 1:15, he said there are “three main words”: kingdom, repent, and believe. He added later, “We’ve got to get this repent and believe in the gospel part right.” Pastor Larry agreed, stating, “The first call of the gospel is to repent

and believe.” Similarly, Pastor Jim stated, “My hope would be that they would embrace the rule of Christ in their heart.”

### *Heralds Fanning Out*

Many shared that they hoped to see their congregations engage in evangelism, proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand. Pastor Jeff expressed this perspective when he said, “We want to make sure we’re cultivating people who are proclaimers of the gospel.” Pastor Bob agreed when he said that “the church’s responsibility is to proclaim” the fact that “Christ was crowned king 2000 years ago.” But for Bob evangelism “is not the process of trying to persuade people to vote for our guy.” He said, “Rather, it’s heralds fanning out into the countryside to tell the rebels that your capital city has fallen; there’s a new king on the throne; and we think you should come along quietly.” Pastor Bill shared an analogy that illustrates his agreement. He used the analogy of Air Force PJs (pararescue jumpers) who “are called to jump out of planes at high altitudes and descend for people who are engaged in war, who are wounded, and to rescue them and to extract them from the warfare.” He said, “I would hope that we would envision ourselves as PJs.”

### *Less Binary*

Many shared that as a result of their proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand, their congregations began integrating the lordship of Christ into their lives. Pastor Tim said, “What we want to do is stimulate and motivate the Christian imagination to think in less binary terms about their faith and the rest of their life.” He described this as seeing their faith “as being essentially integrated as the undercurrent of every part of their lives,

in all the places where they live, work, and play.” Pastor Bob said that “at the church on the Lord’s day,” the congregation is “informed and taught how the authority of Christ applies to everything in principle, and it’s up to them to go out into their realms of expertise and make the applications.” He asked, “How does the lordship of Christ apply to map making? How does the lordship of Christ apply to software coding? How does the lordship of Christ apply to building libraries?” Pastor Gus described this as “a closer resemblance between who we are as individuals to Christ and who we are as a community to Christ.” One diagnostic question was, “Do we see more of our neighbors encountering the truth of the Gospel as a result of our community?”

### *Life-Giving Presence*

Many pastors shared that they desire to see their congregation make a “renewing impact” on their community. Pastor Tim said, “We use the phrase ‘life-giving presence’ a lot in our community.” He described this as the “renewing impact” or “renewing effect” that “a Spirit-filled, fruit-bearing Christian” will have on “the people, the places, the things that we touch.” He said, “God’s people have an opportunity to make a dent in the world for the kingdom.” Many pastors used the language of being the “salt of the earth and light of the world.” Pastor Larry commented, “It doesn’t take a lot of salt, if it’s salty, to change everything around it.” Pastor Jim said, “I implore you, embrace Jesus as king and let’s be a kingdom church.” He described a kingdom church as being involved in redemptive ministry in their neighborhood, giving 25 percent of their budget to missions, and “putting a lot of effort and resource towards” kingdom expansion.

Pastor Bob was bolder. According to his postmillennial presuppositions, he believed that one day there will be “universal peace and harmony” that will accompany

“the formal recognition of the lordship of Jesus Christ” and the “establishment of another Christendom.” He said, “Fifty years before the end, the church will have much more authority, to speak and teach and proclaim, that’s recognized by the world, because the world is in effect all baptized.” When Bob began preaching this message at the beginning of his ministry, he said, “I was preaching what I could see with my eyes in the text, but which I could not see with my eyes in our town.” Forty-five years later, Bob commented, “After basically a generation of preaching and teaching this way, I’m starting to see with my eyes the kinds of things that we’ve been talking about.” For example, he shared that he has seen “a parallel economy grow up” in their small city and that “approximately 35 percent of all the school-aged children in Smallville are receiving a private Christian education.” He said this has resulted in “an authority differential, a real shift” like “in a ball game where you can sense the momentum of the game has shifted.” He mentioned that sometimes “refugees” move to their city from other parts of the country because of the way they “are involved in [their] culture war endeavors.” He said when they arrive in their community one of the first questions they ask is, “Why is everybody so cheerful? Aren’t we supposed to be manning the walls of the Alamo?” He responded, “No, we think we’re winning.” Pastor Jeff shared a tempered response. When speaking of the members of his congregation he said, “I want them to transform the world for Christ. That’s what I want for them, if God grants that.” However, Pastor Jeff disagreed with the idea that the church is called to redeem or renew the wider community. He said, “I don’t think the end goal is to redeem the culture this side of glory as part of our gospel commission.” He added a caveat, “I hope for change in the wider community; it will only happen when people are really transformed by the true gospel of grace.”



It was not clear from the pastors' responses whether they were making a distinction between the church proper and the members of the church.

### *Live Out Kingdom Values*

Most shared that they would like to see their congregations “live out kingdom values” as a result of their proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand. Pastor Jim commented on a series of sermons he preached in the Gospel of Mark. He said, “I was hoping that Christ would be enthroned [in the hearts of my congregation] and that people would indeed live out kingdom values.” He described kingdom values as “the proclamation of the gospel,” “love and service to your neighbor,” “do justice,” “walk humbly,” and “manifest mercy.” Similarly, Pastor Gus described this as “living into the life of the kingdom.” He commented, “You can have confidence that you’re living into the life of the kingdom in as much as Christ is becoming somewhat of your imitation.” He suggested looking at the emphasis and priorities of Christ as the model for life, especially in the ways that Christ “related to people who were his and related to people who were not his or not yet his.” Practically speaking, Pastor Gus suggested that the kingdom of God is expressed in a concrete way when Christians see people and bring mercy, compassion, service, and commitment into their particular sphere of life.

Many pastors shared a variety of kingdom values that they hope to see their congregations embody. Pastor Tim shared, “There are two primary signs of the kingdom: generosity, a readiness to give ourselves away for the one who loves us and gave himself for us; and, an ability to suffer with hope.” He said, “The will to serve is what governs the heart that’s been overtaken by the kingdom.” He also shared that he hopes to see his congregation have a “curiosity about people who are different than you.” He describes

this as “curiosity that motivates you to take steps to see the kingdom of God through their eyes and the experience of the kingdom through their eyes.” Pastor Gus shared that he hoped to see his congregation unified. He said, “God is most glorified when we’re most unified in him.” He also said, “I’d like to see a greater percentage of our people really having the substance of cross-cultural life, not because it’s politically correct, but because it’s about being Christologically conformed.” Pastor Bill shared that he desires to see “a lot of love and compassion for other people.” He said, “As our convictions narrow, our love should be broadening.” Pastor Jeff shared that he desires to see a bold courage in his congregation. He hopes that they “feel so assured of the salvation they have in Christ that they’re bold to do all the things they do.”

### *Planting Kingdom Outposts*

Many expressed a desire to see churches planted as a result preaching that the kingdom of God is at hand. Pastor Bill said, “I would love to see us have planted three [or] four churches around us.” He stated that he believes that “taking the kingdom out and building the kingdom of Jesus is church planting,” or what he also called “planting kingdom outposts.” Pastor Jeff agreed, stating, “Most of our mission efforts are in church planting because we think the way the kingdom of God is expanded is through preaching the gospel, and the stewardship of the gospel is given to the local church.”

### *Increasingly Known and Celebrated*

Some expressed a desire to see their congregations be increasingly known and celebrated by their surrounding communities. Pastor Tim said, “I would hope that over time our congregations would become increasingly known and celebrated by our

neighbors everywhere.” He described this in the language of Acts 2:47, “having favor with all the people.” He hopes “that the community looks at our church and see a value add;” a community that is “a positive contributor to the life of the city.” Pastor Gus agreed, stating, “I would want the life and the witness of our community to be so profound and beautiful and compelling in our place that our neighbors would genuinely miss us if we weren’t here anymore.” However, one pastor disagreed with this viewpoint. He said, “You’re going to be forgotten, so just preach the gospel.” He later added, “Don’t worry about your legacy.”

### *Summary of Outcomes*

The final research question asked what outcomes pastors desire when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. Seven types of desired outcomes were shared by the pastors interviewed. The first was to see people “repent and believe the gospel.” Pastors desired to see people turn away from sin and trust in Christ as a result of their proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand. As one pastor shared, “We’ve got to get this ‘repent and believe in the gospel’ part right.” The second type of desired outcome shared was to see church members be like “heralds fanning out” into the world. One pastor used the analogy of “heralds fanning out into the countryside” proclaiming that Jesus is king. Another pastor used the analogy of an Air Force Pararescue Jumper. The third type of desired outcome was to see church members be “less binary” by integrating their faith into every part of their lives. As one pastor asked, how does the lordship of Christ apply to every area of one’s life? The fourth desired outcome shared was to be a “life-giving presence” in the community by having a “renewing impact.” One pastor went so far as to believe that the outcome will be

“another Christendom.” What was not clear was whether or not pastors were making a distinction between the call of the church or the call of Christians to be a “life-giving presence.” The fifth desired outcome was to see their congregations “live out kingdom values,” or living “into the life of the kingdom.” A variety of “values” were shared including, the desire to proclaim the gospel, “broadening” love and compassion, “a bold courage,” unity, generosity, ability to suffer with hope, the will to serve, and curiosity about people who are different from themselves. The sixth desired outcome was “planting kingdom outposts” or church planting. One pastor said they plant churches because “the way to expand the kingdom of God is through preaching the gospel” and “stewardship of the gospel is given to the local church.” The final desired outcome was to be “increasingly known and celebrated” by the community. Pastors desired to see their church be a “value add” and a “positive contributor to the life of the city.” However, one pastor disagreed, saying, “You’re going to be forgotten, so preach the gospel.”

## **Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this study is to explore how pastors proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. This chapter provided the findings of the seven pastoral interviews and reported on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions. The first research question asked how pastors describe the kingdom of God is at hand when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. They described it as “the rule and reign” or “realm” of Jesus. Pastors shared that it is a kingdom that belongs to Jesus and is ruled by him. Pastors described the kingdom as an “already” kingdom that is “here” and “available” because Jesus is “already starting to make all things new.” Pastors shared that

the kingdom of God was established at the ascension of Jesus and is being established as more and more people are disciplined. Pastors acknowledged that Jesus is the ruling and reigning king, right now. Once His kingdom is fully established, meaning once all the nations are disciplined, then the king will return. As one pastor said, “Christ is ruling in principle, definitively now, and he wields an iron rod and he’s in the process of bringing all the nations into submission.” Pastors expressed that the dynamic nature of the kingdom saying that it “grows,” “expands,” and “advances.” While the expanding of the kingdom is “slow” and “deliberate,” more like walking from the plains to the mountain than launching a space shuttle, the kingdom is expanding as the gospel is preached and sinners come to faith in Jesus. Pastors expressed that the church has a primary role in kingdom expansion as “the engine of the kingdom powered by the Holy Spirit.” Pastors expressed that the church is an “outpost” or “embassy” of the kingdom called to “colonize communities” by preaching the gospel, equipping believers, and sending them out as “ambassadors” of the king. Pastors shared that the church’s main role is to preach, inform, and teach Christians who will “go out into the kingdom and establish and firm up and develop the kingdom.”

The second research question asked what challenges pastors observe when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. Pastors shared both theological and cultural challenges. They expressed the theological challenge of a “lingo” problem associated with trying to communicate a concept that is foreign to many people. Some shared concerns of a temptation for the church to get “off course” by adopting a mission of “cultural transformation.” One pastor shared the challenge of skepticism of his postmillennial presuppositions. Another pastor shared the

challenge of people who choose the “optics” of kingdom living rather than the “substance” of it.

Pastors also expressed a variety of cultural challenges. Some expressed the challenge of confusion about morality, truth, and identity. Some pastors observed how some people confuse contextualization with capitulation and inevitably drift toward cultural accommodation. Some pastors expressed the challenge of political partisanship that has created “a discipleship imbalance.” One pastor called this challenge “the greatest distraction to the gospel” in the West. Some pastors shared about the cultural challenge of living in “a radically individual age” where the chief value is “my personal freedom and choice.”

The third research question asked what strategies pastor use when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. Pastors shared two types of responses: homiletic strategies and ministry strategies. Homiletically, pastors address misunderstandings “straight up,” counter “false narratives,” push “into the imaginative,” preach repentance, and preach with humility. One pastor shared that he tries to use “the homiletic to really give a sense of what the kingdom is about.” Pastors also shared several ministry strategies when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand. Preaching is “the central engine” of kingdom advancement because that is “the way the kingdom of God is expanded.” Pastors expressed that corporate worship is the “central activity” of kingdom people, especially when the liturgy is “kingdom-minded.” Pastors also shared the strategy of encouraging a “kingdom mindset” among their congregations by helping them to think outwardly and envisioning themselves as being sent out as

ambassadors of the king. Finally, pastors expressed the ministry strategy of establishing satellite kingdom ministries such as church planting and Christian schools.

The final research question asked what outcomes pastors desire when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. Pastors expressed several desired outcomes including, first of all, the desire to see people “repent and believe in the gospel.” Pastors desired to see their congregations be “proclaimers” or “heralds” of the kingdom and of “the fact” that Jesus is king. In the words of one pastor, Christians are sent out into the world as “Air Force Pararescue Jumpers” on a rescue mission. Pastors also expressed a desire to see their church members become “less binary” in the way that they think about their faith and the rest of their lives. As one pastor asked, “How does the lordship of Christ apply” to every part of one’s life? Another outcome pastors expressed was that their congregations would be a “life-giving presence” to their community. One pastor went so far as to declare his belief that the proclamation of the kingdom of God will lead to “the establishment of another Christendom.” Many pastors did not seem to distinguish between the role of Christians and the role of church in this “life-giving” work. Pastors also expressed a desire to see their congregations “live out kingdom values” including “a bold courage,” unity, “broadening” love and compassion, generosity, the ability to suffer with hope, and a curiosity about people who are different from themselves. Many pastors also expressed a desire to see the planting of churches, or “kingdom outposts.” Finally, some pastors shared a desire for their congregation to be “increasingly known and celebrated” by the community. However, one pastor disagreed saying, “You’re going to be forgotten, so preach the gospel.”

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to explore how pastors proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. This chapter will present a discussion of the findings and recommendations based on the literature review and analysis of interview data. In chapter two, the review of literature shed insight on what Jesus meant when he said, “The kingdom of God is at hand,” as well as the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church and how pastors proclaim the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society. In chapter four, interview data was analyzed using the following research questions as a guide.

1. How do pastors describe the kingdom of God is at hand when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?
2. What challenges do pastors face when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?
3. What strategies do pastors use when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?
4. What outcomes do pastors desire when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies?

### **Summary of the Study and Findings**

This study reviewed relevant literature in three areas and analyzed interview data from seven senior pastors. The literature review has shown that when Jesus announced, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the



gospel,”<sup>527</sup> he was making a public declaration that God’s revolution to overthrow Satan and evil had begun. The literature suggests that he was announcing the dawning of the establishment of his kingship. With the dawning of his kingship, he was beginning the work of bringing earth and heaven back into harmony as he proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom. As such, the literature suggests that Jesus’s kingship is not limited to a particular place or time in history but is an abstract reality that is both fulfilled and awaited; both eternal and eschatological; both present and imminent. Therefore, according to the literature, the kingdom of God is the kingship of Jesus, established in his work of new creation, which may also be described as his redemptive reign in the world. Moreover, the literature suggested that the announcement that Jesus’s kingship is “at hand” is an urgent summons to all that demands a response: either receive him and his kingship or reject him. According to the literature, those who receive him through repentance and faith in the gospel enter his kingdom and become the earthly manifestation of the kingdom of God, also known as the church. The church, therefore, bears a unique relationship to the kingdom of God.

While closely related to the kingdom of God, the church is not identical to the kingdom of God, according to the literature. Rather, the church is a birthed fellowship of a people who have acknowledged the kingdom of Jesus and order their lives by his kingship. In this present age, scholars suggest that the church is a counterculture that functions as an embassy of grace, a colony of heaven, or a kingdom outpost. As the manifestation of the kingdom of Jesus, the church bears certain responsibilities, including the call to bear witness to the kingship of Jesus, the call to extend the kingship of Jesus,

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<sup>527</sup> Mark 1:15

and the call to exercise the authority of the kingship of Jesus. According to scholars, the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom is central. The church proclaims the gospel by preaching the message of the kingdom of God and by manifesting the life of the kingdom of God. If proclamation is the central mission of the church, as the literature suggests, then pastors are tasked with doing this work effectively and faithfully. Yet, as the literature revealed, they face challenges from the culture.

The literature revealed that pastors proclaim the gospel of the kingdom in a culture awash in pluralism. In response to the pressures of philosophical pluralism, and its related outlook postmodernism, the literature revealed several practices pastor ought to consider. These practices include expository preaching, engaging contextualization, lovingly exposing the bankruptcy of the age, using biblical theology in preaching, repeatedly preaching the historic gospel, remembering one's own past, and desperately depending on the Holy Spirit.

The interviews revealed that pastors describe the kingdom of God as the rule and reign of Jesus. Pastors also described the kingdom of God as an already kingdom here and available because Jesus has already started making all things new. Some pastors suggested that once the kingship of Jesus is fully established on earth, then he will return. The pastors acknowledged that this establishment process is a deliberate process that takes millennia as the gospel of the kingdom is preached and more and more sinners come to faith in Jesus. Pastors shared that the crucial role of the church is to be "the engine of the kingdom powered by the Holy Spirit." Pastors view the role of the church as an outpost or embassy of Jesus's kingdom called to colonize communities by

preaching the gospel, equipping believers, and sending them out as ambassadors of the king. Yet, pastors face several challenges as they lead their congregations.

Theologically, pastors contend with a “lingo” problem, because the kingdom of God is foreign concept to many in their congregations. A second theological challenge shared is the temptation to adopt a cultural transformation mission in place of preaching the gospel of the kingdom to transform or redeem the culture. Other theological challenges shared include contending with skepticism towards a postmillennial optimism and the performative diversity of kingdom living minus the substance of it. Culturally speaking, pastors contend with confusion about morality and truth, and confusion over how far to take contextualization. The political partisan nature in America also creates a discipleship imbalance, which one pastor called “the greatest distraction to the gospel” in the West. Related to this, pastors acknowledged the challenge of living in an age where the chief value is personal freedom and choice. In response to these challenges, pastors employ a variety of strategies.

The interviews revealed homiletic and ministry strategies that pastors use when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. Homiletically, pastors address misunderstandings, counter false narratives, push into the imaginative, preach repentance, and preach with humility. From a ministry standpoint, pastors view preaching as the “central engine” of the advancement of the kingdom and see corporate worship as the “central activity” of Jesus’s kingdom people. Pastors encourage their congregations to have a “kingdom mindset” that thinks outwardly, envisioning themselves as ambassadors of the king. Related to this, pastors advocate for establishing satellite kingdom ministries such as planting new churches and establishing

Christian schools. When employing these homiletic and ministry strategies, pastors desire several outcomes.

The interviews also revealed that when pastors proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand, they desire to see people change their thinking and lifestyle as they repent and believe in the gospel. They desire their congregations to view themselves as proclaimers sent out on a rescue mission to herald the fact of Jesus's kingship. They desire their congregations to change the way they view their faith and the rest of their lives, going from a binary faith-and-life-are-separate-entities mindset to a how-does-the-kingship-of-Jesus-apply-to-all-of-life mindset. As a result, pastors desire that their congregations to have a life-giving presence in their communities as they live out the values of the kingdom of God. They also desire that their churches would plant more churches and be increasingly known and celebrated in their communities.

## **Discussion of Findings**

In this section, the literature and interview research is compared to identify key issues relevant to the purpose of this study. Overall, the research revealed three main areas where clarity is needed for pastors who proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand in pluralistic societies. These areas are 1) how pastors describe the kingdom of God is at hand, 2) the responsibilities of the church for the kingdom of God, and 3) how pastors proclaim the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society.

### *“Kingdom” Clarity*

The first area where clarity is needed is in how pastors describe the kingdom of God is at hand. The literature and interview research have revealed three key components

for clarity. The first relates to the definition of the kingdom of God. The second relates to the “at hand” nature of the kingdom of God. The third relates to the urgency of proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand.

### **Define the Kingdom of God in the Abstract**

The literature and interview research revealed that most pastors and scholars describe the kingdom of God in abstract terms defining it as the “rule, reign, or kingship of God.” However, most English Bibles translate the original text using the concrete noun “kingdom.” This causes confusion. France notes that in English, the word “kingdom” is “primarily a ‘concrete’ noun, with a clearly identifiable ‘thing’ to which it refers.” However, says France, “the biblical nouns are abstract, and refer to the *act* of ruling, the situation of being king.”<sup>528</sup> Thus, France and others define the kingdom of God as “God’s kingship.” Pastor Bob expressed something similar when he described it as “the rule and realm of the Lord Jesus Christ.” My conclusion is that pastors would provide needed clarity by defining the kingdom of God in the abstract using words like “rule,” “reign,” or “kingship” of God. But is using the word “kingdom” a bad idea? I think it depends on how it is used.

One of the noted problems with the English word “kingdom” is that it denotes a concrete conception referring to the kingdom of God as a “thing” or place. This concrete conception of kingdom naturally leads to a question: where is the kingdom of God today? However, the research revealed that pastors and scholars are not in agreement about the location of the kingdom of God. Is the kingdom of God currently a spiritual kingdom that

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<sup>528</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 12.

exists only in the hearts of men and women who repent and believe or does the kingdom of God currently include more than this? For example, Pastor Jeff referred to the kingdom of God as “a spiritual, redemptive kingdom” in this age that “will ultimately be a physical kingdom in the new heavens and new earth.” However, Pastor Gus expressed a concern that the kingdom of God has been “reduced to what Christ is doing in our hearts.” He suggests that there is “more for us to explore in terms of what it looks like for us to be a kingdom people.” The literature revealed a similar disagreement. Baugh, for example, suggests that “God’s rule in people’s hearts, the church, and the interaction of Christians in the world,” are only the “effects of the kingdom” but not the kingdom itself.<sup>529</sup> For Baugh, the kingdom of God is limited to “the new creation” work in people’s hearts.<sup>530</sup> Wenham disagrees, stating, “The kingdom which Jesus proclaimed was not just up in heaven; it was more like an invasion of earth by heaven!”<sup>531</sup> France says something similar, stating, “The message of Mark 1.15 is not that a change of government is imminent, but that *God* is taking over.”<sup>532</sup> My conclusion is that the confusion over the spiritual versus physical nature of the kingdom of God will be reduced if we refer to the “kingdom” of God as the “kingship” of God. When using a more abstract term like “kingship,” the question then becomes not where the kingdom of God is, but who in this present age acknowledges the kingship of Jesus? Moreover, if one concurs with the OT and rabbinic context that the kingdom of God refers to “the fact that

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<sup>529</sup> Baugh, *The Majesty on High*, 10.

<sup>530</sup> Baugh, 2.

<sup>531</sup> Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, 23.

<sup>532</sup> France, *Divine Government*, 22.

God reigns as King,”<sup>533</sup> then, if one must use the word “kingdom,” it would be right to say that the kingdom of God is everywhere. Pastor Gus said as much when he said, “All of the creation is under the domain of God.”

This abstract understanding of the kingdom of God may also put an end the one-kingdom/two-kingdom debate. For if we describe the kingdom of God as the kingship of Jesus, then one must ask, “How many kingships of Jesus are there?” The Great Commission indicates that there is only one king and one kingship. Moreover, just because someone does not acknowledge the fact that Jesus is king does not mean that Jesus is any less the king and that the world is any less the realm of his kingship. Furthermore, if one rightly affirms that the kingship of Jesus was established here on earth when Jesus ascended to heaven over 2000 years ago, then one must conclude that the rule and realm of Jesus Christ is over all of creation. I am hard-pressed to disagree with Pastor Bob who said, “Christ is ruling in principle, definitively now, and he wields an iron rod, and he’s in the process of bringing all the nations into submission.” Moreover, I agree with pastors who suggest that once this work is done, then Christ will return. This leads to a second key component for clearly describing the kingdom of God.

### **The Kingdom of God is “At Hand”**

A second key component for clearly describing the kingdom of God must include the “at hand” nature of the kingdom of God. The research revealed that many describe this aspect of the kingdom of God using “already and not yet” language. Horton

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<sup>533</sup> Dodd, *Parables*, 21.

expresses this, stating, “There is an ‘already’ and ‘not yet’ aspect to the kingdom.”<sup>534</sup> He suggests that the kingdom of God is a “semi-realized kingdom.” He writes, “Even now the age to come is breaking in upon this passing age, but not yet in the visible and completed form that will be universally evident at Christ’s appearing.”<sup>535</sup> However, Pastor Bob suggests a different way of looking at it. He stated, “The kingdom is established in principle, and we long for the day when we see the fruit of it established and honored and recognized in every place.” My conclusion, therefore, is that the kingdom of God is “at hand” in the sense that, as Pastor Jim stated, “The king is here, and he’s establishing his kingdom.” Furthermore, I agree with Baugh who cautions against using the “already and not yet” language to describe the “at hand” nature of the kingdom of God.

Referring to the kingdom of God as “already and not yet” leads to, as Baugh puts it, “unwanted inaccuracies.” Baugh suggests that it is “too vague” to refer to the kingdom of God as “already and not yet without a number of qualifications.”<sup>536</sup> Baugh suggests that it would be misleading to say that the kingdom of God is both already and not yet in the same way. For example, Christian citizenship in the kingdom of God is not both already and not yet. Rather, Christians “already” possess the kingdom of God even though the full benefits of the kingdom of God are “not yet” consummated. Another caution with using the already and not yet language is that it may reduce the kingdom of God to a single time, place, event, or situation. Rather, I agree with France who says it is

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<sup>534</sup> Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 66.h

<sup>535</sup> Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, 219.

<sup>536</sup> Baugh, *The Majesty on High*, 139.b



“not appropriate to ask whether ‘the kingdom of God’ is past, present, or future.” Instead, with France, I prefer to refer to the kingship of Jesus as “both eternal and eschatological, both fulfilled and awaited, both present and imminent.”<sup>537</sup> Therefore, rather than using the “already not yet” language for describing the kingdom of God is “at hand,” a more helpful description would be to describe the kingdom of God as having been established as far as the kingship of Jesus has been established. In this way, we can rightly say the kingship of Jesus is both fulfilled and awaited; both has come and is coming. Furthermore, I conclude that what is “at hand” is the establishment of the kingship of Jesus over all creation and what is yet to come is the fruit of the established kingship of Jesus, namely, that universal peace and harmony that will come when sin is finally subdued and mortified and when all nations formally recognize the kingship of Jesus. The fact that the kingship of Jesus is at hand leads to a third key component to describing the kingdom of God is at hand.

### **An Urgent Summons**

A third key component to describing the kingdom of God is at hand is that it is an urgent summons. When Jesus declares, “The time is fulfilled; and the kingdom of God is at hand,” he adds, “repent and believe in the gospel.”<sup>538</sup> Lane suggests that Jesus is not giving content but conveying “a summons” calling human beings to make “a radical decision.” When Jesus makes this declaration, he is giving an urgent summons, “Either a man submits to the summons of God or he chooses this world and its riches and

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<sup>537</sup> France, *Mark*, 93.

<sup>538</sup> Mark 1:15.

honor.”<sup>539</sup> France describes the summons to repent and believe in the gospel as “a demand for a radical new direction.”<sup>540</sup> As Edwards puts it, the summons to repent and believe in the gospel lays “claim to the total allegiance of believers.”<sup>541</sup> Pastor Jeff expressed its urgency when he said, “We’ve got to get this ‘repent and believe the gospel’ part right. You can screw up your explanation of the particulars of the kingdom. You cannot screw up what it means to turn from your sins and unto Christ.” Therefore, those who proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand must include this urgent summons to make a radical change through repentance from sin and by accepting and committing to the kingship of Jesus.

### *The Responsibilities of the Church for the Kingdom of God*

A second area where clarity is needed for pastors who proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand is the responsibilities of the church for the kingdom of God. The literature and interview research revealed several questions that require clarity: 1) does the church merely proclaim the gospel of the kingdom to a culture or does the church also renew the culture; 2) how should the church view herself in this present age; and 3) does the church build the kingdom of God?

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<sup>539</sup> Lane, *Mark*, 2:66.

<sup>540</sup> France, *Mark*, 93.

<sup>541</sup> Edwards, *Mark*, 47.

## **Merely Proclaiming a Message or Also Renewing a Culture?**

One question that the research revealed is: does the church merely proclaim the gospel of the kingdom to a culture, or does it also renew it? The literature suggests that “the central duty” and “the most crucial vocation” of the church is to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom of God.<sup>542</sup> Pastor Bob agreed, referring to preaching as “the central engine of gospel advance.” After stating something similar, Pastor Jeff said, “I don’t think the end goal is to redeem the culture this side of glory as part of our gospel commission.” However, some scholars argue that the church is responsible for more than “simply winning people to Christ.”<sup>543</sup> Keller suggests that the church should be a “full-service body.” He writes, “As things are brought back under Christ’s rule and authority, they are restored to health, beauty, and freedom.”<sup>544</sup> Several pastors shared similar sentiments when they expressed a desire to see their churches have a life-giving presence in their communities. Pastor Tim described this as the “renewing-impact” that Christians will have on “the people, the places, the things that [they] touch.” Pastor Bob shared the renewing effects of his preaching the gospel of the kingdom for over forty-five years. He stated, “After basically a generation of preaching and teaching this way, I’m starting to see with my eyes the kinds of things that we’ve been talking about.” Therefore, the primary responsibility of the church for the kingdom of God is to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom through preaching and worship with the hope that over time change in the culture will happen. The proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom and the renewal of

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<sup>542</sup> Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced: Christ’s Kingdom on Earth*, 76; Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 67.

<sup>543</sup> Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, 54.

<sup>544</sup> Keller, 53.

the culture are not mutually exclusive. However, I appreciate and agree with the concerns raised about the church losing sight of her main mission to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom in exchange for a mission of cultural transformation. I agree with Pastor Larry who said that when a church makes cultural transformation the mission of the church “then it’s only a matter of time” until the church exercises “cultural accommodation” in the name of contextualization. Rather than adopting a mission of cultural transformation, the church must maintain a singular focus on proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. Faithful gospel proclamation will over time inevitably lead to cultural transformation as more and more people hear the gospel of the kingdom, repent and believe in the gospel, and then submit every area of their lives to the kingship of Jesus. This leads to the second question that requires clarity for pastors and churches.

### **The Kingdom Itself or an Expression of the Kingdom?**

Secondly, how should the church view herself in this present age – as the kingdom itself or an expression of the kingdom? The literature revealed a variety of responses. Some scholars argue that the church is closely related to but is not the kingdom of God.<sup>545</sup> Van Dixhoorn, for example, states, “His kingdom is bigger than the church, but it certainly includes the church.”<sup>546</sup> Pastor Gus said something similar, stating, “The church is a subset of the bigger thing called the kingdom.” Others argue that the church is the only manifestation of the kingdom of God in this present age.<sup>547</sup>

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<sup>545</sup> Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 109; Beach, “The Kingdom of God,” 54; DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 126.

<sup>546</sup> Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*, 341.

<sup>547</sup> Baugh, *The Majesty on High*, 10; David VanDrunen, *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms*, 123.

For example, McKnight states, “It is reasonable to say that *the kingdom is the church, and the church is the kingdom*—that they are the *same* even if they are not identical.”<sup>548</sup>

Pastor Tim said as much when he said that the distinction between the church and the kingdom is “minimal.”

Related to this, the literature and interviews revealed a variety of analogies that illustrate the relationship of the church to the kingdom. For example, the literature referred to the church as an “outpost of the kingdom of God,”<sup>549</sup> as “the colonies of heaven” on earth,<sup>550</sup> and as “an embassy of grace in an empire of death.”<sup>551</sup> The pastors interviewed shared similar analogies including the church as “the engine of the kingdom powered by the Spirit,” as “heralds fanning out,” as “an outpost” called “to colonize communities,” as “the embassy of the kingdom,” as “the equipping center of the kingdom,” and as “Air Force pararescue jumpers.” My conclusion is that the church ought to view itself as an expression of the kingdom of God. The most helpful and biblically consistent analogies refer to the church as either an embassy or an outpost for the kingship of Jesus. Furthermore, when the church proclaims the gospel of the kingdom of Jesus, it functions not only as an embassy for the kingdom of God but also as a counterculture in the world. I agree with Keller who said, “The church is to be a new

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<sup>548</sup> McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 206.

<sup>549</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 127.

<sup>550</sup> Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced: Christ’s Kingdom on Earth*, 24.

<sup>551</sup> Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 77.

society in which the world can see what family dynamics, business practices, race relations, and all of life can be under the kingship of Jesus Christ.”<sup>552</sup>

Consequentially, as an embassy or outpost for the kingship of Jesus, the church will live out or manifest the values of the kingdom of God. I agree with Beach, who writes, “The church is the most significant manifestation of the kingdom of God as we await the return of Christ.”<sup>553</sup> Although the kingship of Jesus extends beyond the church into cultures, societies, governments, and nations, at certain times in history, and particular places in the world, the church stands alone as the only manifestation, or expression, of the kingship of Jesus. Therefore, the church’s call to be an embassy of grace, especially in places of darkness and death, remains strong and necessary. For whom but the church will faithfully and continually proclaim the gospel of the kingship of Jesus in this present age, even when every other human institution may forsake King Jesus? This leads to a final question that requires greater clarity.

### **The Church as Kingdom Builder?**

Thirdly, if the church is called to be an embassy of grace, then does this mean that the church is called to build the kingdom of God? The literature and interview research revealed a variety of responses to this question. Some argue that the church is called to build the kingdom of God. For example, Wright argues that obedience to the gospel necessitates that Christians must “build for the kingdom” through such things as acts of love, gratitude, and kindness, and in other things like building up the church and making

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<sup>552</sup> Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, 54.

<sup>553</sup> Beach, “The Kingdom of God,” 55.

the name of Jesus honored in the world.<sup>554</sup> Pastor Jeff expressed a similar view, referring to the work of the church as a “kingdom building enterprise.” However, others argue that the church does not build the kingdom but rather the kingdom is something that we receive or enter. For example, Horton argues from Hebrews 11:28 that because the kingdom of God is “an unshakable kingdom—incapable of being thwarted by our own unfaithfulness,” it “is not a kingdom that we are building but one that we are receiving.”<sup>555</sup> Others argue that rather than build the kingdom, the church bears witness to the kingdom. For example, DeYoung and Gilbert argue that the primary task of Christians is not to build, establish, or build for the kingdom of God, “but rather to be witnesses to this representing, suffering, forgiving King.”<sup>556</sup> Another viewpoint is that the church expands or extends the kingdom of God. Pastor Larry suggested this, stating, “The church actually creates the expansion of the kingdom by the discipleship of believers who now in discipleship learn how to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.” Pastor Jeff used similar language, stating, “The way the kingdom of God is expanded is through the preaching of the gospel.” How we describe the kingdom of God will affect the way we view this question. If we use a more concrete term like “kingdom,” which may imply a particular thing or place, then it makes sense that we would wonder if the church needs to build, extend, or even establish that thing or place. But if we use an abstract description, referring to the kingdom of God as the rule or kingship of Jesus, then the question is potentially eliminated. In this abstract sense, the church does not build or

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<sup>554</sup> Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 208.

<sup>555</sup> Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 65.

<sup>556</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 138.d

extend or expand the kingdom of God because the kingship of Jesus is not something that needs to be built. Rather, the church exists as an embassy of grace to proclaim the gospel of kingship of Jesus. As the church faithfully proclaims the gospel of the kingship of Jesus, more and more sinners will renounce sin and self-righteousness, and more and more people will willingly bow the knee to King Jesus in response to the witness of the church. People enter the kingdom of God as they acknowledge the kingship of Jesus through repentance and faith in the gospel of the kingdom. Therefore, while the church does not build or establish or expand the kingdom of God, the church is God's primary instrument of extending the gospel of the kingship of Jesus to all the nations. Jesus is king, and the church is called to proclaim the gospel of the kingship of Jesus. The literature and interviews rightly suggest that the church does this through its central duty of preaching, the central activity of corporate worship, and by establishing satellite missions, or outposts, such as planting new churches, building Christian schools, and sending Christians into unreached frontiers with the gospel of the kingdom. This leads to the third area that requires greater clarity.

### *Proclaiming the Kingdom of God is At Hand in Pluralistic Societies*

Since proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom is the central duty and crucial vocation of the Christian church, this raises an important question: how do pastors faithfully proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand, especially given the dominant ideology of philosophical pluralism in the West? From the research, several key findings will benefit pastors who desire to proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies.



## **Preach Expository Sermons**

One key finding is the use of expository preaching as the “main diet” of preaching for a congregation.<sup>557</sup> Mohler describes expository preaching as “reading the Word of God and then explaining it to the people so that they understand it.”<sup>558</sup> Beville, who notes that in a postmodern, pluralistic society, people are “suspicious of truth claims, especially when they consider them to be the opinions of an individual,” suggests that expository preaching is “the best approach to solving the dilemma of communicating truth, primarily because the truths are not the preacher’s own, but the truth claims of God.”<sup>559</sup> Notably, not one pastor interviewed explicitly shared that expository preaching is a strategy they employ when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand. However, some implied the practice of expository preaching as a way they proclaim the gospel of the kingdom. For example, Pastor Jeff said, “I’m in Genesis, and I would argue that’s what I’m still doing, is preaching the kingdom of God.” Despite the lack of explicit responses from the pastors interviewed on the role of expository preaching in their ministry, my conclusion agrees with the literature. I believe that expository preaching is the best method for proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society.

## **Regularly Preach the Kingship of Jesus**

A second key finding for proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in a pluralistic society is the central theme of the kingship of Jesus. DeYoung suggests that the kingdom

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<sup>557</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 32.

<sup>558</sup> Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent*, 52.

<sup>559</sup> Beville, *Preaching Christ in a Postmodern Culture*, 88.

is “a central theme” in Jesus’s teaching, in Acts, and in Paul’s epistles.<sup>560</sup> Pastor Bob shared a similar thought when he said, “This subject of the kingdom can’t be considered a secondary or a tertiary issue.” He shared that a kingdom demeanor is “pervasive” in all that he preaches. Other pastors shared that no matter what book they are preaching from, the Scriptures “give you plenty of opportunity to talk about the kingdom.” Wilson, who argues that the “central duty” of the church is the preaching of the kingdom,<sup>561</sup> agrees with these pastors, stating, “We have a kingdom gospel, and so we ought to be preaching a kingdom gospel.”<sup>562</sup> I suggest that pastors consider how to highlight the kingship of Jesus in most sermons, regardless of the biblical text from which they are preaching.

### **Humbly Address Kingdom Misunderstandings**

A third key finding is the importance of humbly addressing potential misunderstandings when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand. The literature referred to this as the practice of contextualization. Altrock describes contextualization in a pluralistic context as “understanding the cultural context and speaking the gospel to that context” by “using vocabulary, illustrations, and images that do not assume prior knowledge of the biblical story and the gospel.”<sup>563</sup> When it comes to proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand, as Pastor Bob observed, “there were all kinds of

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<sup>560</sup> DeYoung, “What Kingdom Story Are We Telling?”

<sup>561</sup> Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced: Christ’s Kingdom on Earth*, 76.

<sup>562</sup> Wilson, 76.

<sup>563</sup> Altrock, *Preaching to Pluralists: How to Proclaim Christ in a Postmodern Age*, 45, 51.

misunderstanding about what that kingdom entailed.” He suggested, “It’s our job to address all the misunderstandings straight up.”

Yet, the literature and interviews revealed that pastors ought to address such misunderstandings with humility and respect. For example, Charpentier suggests, “A dichotomy does not necessarily exist between an unwavering commitment to biblical truth and a respectful tone in communication.”<sup>564</sup> Pastor Jim shared something similar, “I have to be humble enough to say, ‘I don’t know everything.’” Given the confusion that surrounds the concept of the kingdom of God and, given the biblically illiterate culture in which Western pastors minister, pastors must consider these misunderstandings when they proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand. Moreover, pastors would be wise to address any such kingdom misunderstandings with humility and respect.

### **Help People Imagine the Kingdom**

Since there is such prevalent confusion about the kingdom of God, and since many in a pluralistic context are illiterate about the basic plotline of the Bible, a fourth key finding is the role of engaging the imaginations of congregations. Pastors shared that they use illustrations to draw out distinctions for people and to show them what they are trying to say about the kingdom. For example, Pastor Gus expressed that when he preaches on the kingdom, he tries to push his congregation “into the imaginative” using stories, illustrations, and the parables in the gospels to help his congregation grasp what the kingdom of God is about. While this was not a prevalent theme in the literature reviewed, hints are found when the literature suggested that preachers ought to lovingly

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<sup>564</sup> Charpentier, “What Does Evangelical Preaching in a Pluralistic Culture Look Like?,” 101.

expose the bankruptcy of the age. References to an “emptiness” and “spiritual hunger” that leaves human beings longing for more<sup>565</sup> provide opportunities for pastors to help people imagine what might be behind those longings. Eswine suggests that pastors look for four types of “echoes” in each biblical text that will help people identify those similar echoes in their own lives.<sup>566</sup>

Another facet is preaching with imaginative confidence in what the Bible says. Pastor Bob shared that when he began preaching the kingdom of God forty-five years ago, he preached what he could see in the biblical text even though he could not see it in his community. Therefore, a pastor must imagine that what the Bible says about the kingdom of God is true, and will come true, even if what he sees in the world contradicts the gospel of the kingdom. Furthermore, pastors who desire to proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand must engage the imaginations of their congregations with helpful illustrations, analogies, and stories.

### **Remember Repentance**

A fifth key finding is to remember repentance when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand. The literature revealed the importance for pastors to remember personal repentance as crucial part of preparing to preach. Telyea stated, “When preachers fail to begin their sermon preparation process with repentance, they fail to begin with Christ.”<sup>567</sup> However, remembering personal repentance was not shared by the pastors interviewed.

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<sup>565</sup> Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent*, 128.

<sup>566</sup> Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, 43–56.

<sup>567</sup> Telyea, “A Postmodern Lutheran Hermeneutic for Preaching in the Twenty-First Century,” 23.

Instead, the interviews revealed the importance for pastors to remember repentance as part of their message when proclaiming the kingdom of God is at hand. As Pastor Jim stated, “Don’t forget repentance in all this.” My conclusion is that pastors will not be able to effectively call people to repentance until they first privately acknowledge their own sin. I agree with Keller who says, “If your heart isn’t regularly engaged in praise and repentance, if you aren’t constantly astonished at God’s grace in solitude, there’s no way it can happen in public.”<sup>568</sup>

### **The Role of the Holy Spirit**

A sixth key finding is the role of the Holy Spirit in proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. In the literature we discovered that preachers desperately need the Holy Spirit. Eswine writes, “A post-everything environment exposes the limits of our homiletics and forces us back to what we most need—the Holy Spirit of God.”<sup>569</sup> Keller noted, “The difference between good preaching and *great* preaching lies mainly in the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the listener as well as the preacher.”<sup>570</sup> However, while the pastors acknowledged the role of the Holy Spirit in making “kingdom advances,” none of them acknowledged a sense of personal dependence upon the Holy Spirit as a key part of their proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom. Although I believe that if directly asked, many would acknowledge their dependence on the Holy Spirit, it is telling that none of them spoke of this in the interviews. While I can only speculate as to why a dependence

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<sup>568</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 168.

<sup>569</sup> Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World*, 246.

<sup>570</sup> Keller, *Preaching*, 11.

on the Holy Spirit was left out of their responses, I wonder how much the doing of proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom overshadows the discipline of remembering who we are on our own. I agree with Keller who encourages pastors to glory in their infirmities through the discipline of constantly reminding themselves of what they are under their own power. In this discipline, says Keller, pastors will be led to “desperate dependence on the Spirit” and a “joyful freedom of knowing that in the end nothing in preaching rests on your eloquence, your wisdom, your ability.”<sup>571</sup> Yes, and amen.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

In light of the findings described above, pastors and churches are well advised to consider the following recommendations. First, I recommend that pastors and churches reexamine their understanding of the primary mission of the institutional church. The church’s central duty is to proclaim the gospel of the kingship of Jesus. While cultural transformation may be a noble cause for Christians in their various spheres of life, the church as an institution must remain singularly focused on the commission that Jesus gave to make disciples of all nations. The preaching of the gospel of the kingship of Jesus is the primary way that God makes disciples in the world today. Having said that, I believe it would be fitting for churches to consider how they might support other so-called satellite ministries such as church planting and establishing Christian schools. The church may consider these operations as extensions of the institutional church and ones that will create a new society or culture as they are established. However, the church must remember that the engine of the gospel advancement in the world is primarily

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<sup>571</sup> Keller, 207.

through preaching and secondarily through the manifestation of the values of a life surrendered to Jesus, even if a person's first introduction to King Jesus is through such manifestations.

Second, I recommend that pastors and churches deepen their understanding of the abstract nature of the biblical concept of the kingdom of God. Due to confusion about the concept of the kingdom of God, more precise descriptions will benefit a pastor and his congregation. In American English, the word 'kingdom' is widely used as a concrete thing or place, such as the Magic Kingdom or Chiefs Kingdom. As these examples imply, kingdom is seen as a place that has limits. People go to the Magic Kingdom and then they leave it. People are part of the Chiefs Kingdom if they cheer for the 2023 Superbowl champs but not if they do not. However, as the findings revealed, the kingdom of God is not limited to a particular place or event or situation. Rather, the kingdom of God refers to the act of God's ruling and the realm of Jesus's kingship. And since all of creation is under the domain of Jesus, then there is nowhere where Jesus is not king. Perhaps pastors might consider referring to the kingdom of God as the kingship of Jesus. This will also help reduce the number of "kingdom" references flying around. As was evidenced by most of the pastors, many Christians use the word "kingdom" as an adjective to describe a way of living, being, or doing something according to a biblical worldview or ethic. For example, many of the pastors interviewed expressed desires to see people be "kingdom-minded," live by "kingdom values," be a "kingdom church," and so on. But if we refer to the kingdom of God as the kingship of Jesus, one can hardly do this. And I think that is a good thing, especially given the already confusing nature surrounding the concept of the kingdom of God. Christians are called to live according to the kingship of Jesus who is

currently reigning as king. Pastors will help their congregations if they consider describing the kingdom of God in these abstract terms.

Third, I recommend that pastors regularly preach expository sermons on the gospel of the kingship of Jesus with confidence and humility. Since the kingship of Jesus is a central theme in Jesus's teaching, and since preaching the kingship of Jesus is a central duty of the church, then why would it not be a central theme in a pastors' teaching? As noted earlier, I recommend that pastors consider highlighting or referencing some aspect of the kingship of Jesus in as many sermons as possible. Sermons should show how the kingship of Jesus fulfills the promises given to Adam, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Others could explore how the problems of the time of the Judges are resolved only by the suffering, forgiving King Jesus. Or a pastor might preach what it looks like to live under the kingship of Jesus using the Sermon on the Mount as a guide.

Pastors who regularly preach the gospel of the kingship of Jesus can do so with confidence knowing that the preaching of the gospel is the primary way God extends the kingship of Jesus in the world. Therefore, they can preach with the confidence that as the gospel of the kingship of Jesus is proclaimed, the Great Commission will be accomplished. They can preach with the confidence that since the kingship of Jesus is at hand, Jesus is already at work changing lives through the preaching of the gospel. Therefore, pastors can preach with the confidence of knowing that as Jesus's Spirit changes more and more lives, all cultures will eventually be transformed. However, even if one's eschatological perspective delays the transformation of all cultures until after the return of Jesus, the call to preach the gospel of the kingship of Jesus remains.



Pastors should also consider preaching with humility, knowing that they too are in need of the saving grace through the very Savior-King they proclaim. Although people may be confused about the kingship of Jesus, or about Christianity itself, this does not excuse a spirit of arrogance or rudeness. Rather, pastors can help people with their misunderstandings and longings by encouraging them to consider the kingship of Jesus as they humbly and respectfully answer questions and concerns. This leads to the fourth recommendation.

Fourth, I recommend that pastors and churches spend less time worrying about the already and not yet aspects of the kingship of Jesus and spend more time considering the urgent summons to repent and believe in the gospel of the kingship of Jesus. While eschatological debates are certainly enjoyable in-house discussions among Christians, we can let this distract us from a more pressing matter. There are people right now who desperately need to hear the invitation of Jesus to repent and believe in the gospel. There are people sitting in our pews who desperately need to hear the invitation of Jesus to repent and believe in the gospel. More than this, pastors like me need to hear again and again the urgent summons of Jesus to repent and believe in the gospel. The declaration of Jesus is that the promises of a coming king have been fulfilled, King Jesus is here, and his kingship is being established. Therefore, we must repent and believe in the gospel before it's too late. When pastors proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand, they ought to be careful to not get too caught up in explaining the particulars of the already and not yet aspects of the kingdom. I myself prefer to refer to the kingship of Jesus as fulfilled and awaited -- as having been established in principle and yet awaiting the fulness of it. However, I would prefer to spend more time encouraging others to consider the

ramifications of what happens when King Jesus does return, and they have not repented and believed in the gospel.

Fifth, I recommend that pastors help people imagine the kingship of Jesus with the use of stories, illustrations, and analogies. I am concerned when I hear sermons that include no illustrations, stories, or analogies, especially considering the pluralistic, biblically illiterate context in which many pastors minister. Perhaps pastors might consider preaching a series of sermons on the parables of Jesus. Or perhaps pastors might consider painting the picture for their congregations of what the world will look like when the Great Commission is accomplished. As Pastor Tim shared, “Convince people that what you’re saying is true. Tell them stories of transformation. Show them, don’t just tell them.”

Sixth, I recommend that pastors cry out for the help of the Holy Spirit. At the end of the day, a pastor’s preaching is only as effective as the Holy Spirit makes it. And, as Keller notes, the difference between good and great preaching is the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the listener as well as the preacher.<sup>572</sup> Pastors ought to be committed to developing a deep, rich, private prayer life as a part of crying out to the Holy Spirit for help. However, it is alarming to me that none of the pastors interviewed shared the role of private prayer in their proclamation of the kingship of Jesus. Considering the enormous pressures facing pastors who preach the gospel of the kingship of Jesus in postmodern, pluralistic societies, and the additionally challenge of confusion about the nature of the kingship of Jesus, pastors would be wise to glory in their infirmities and learn to desperately depend on the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>572</sup> Keller, 11.

## Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on how pastors proclaim the kingdom of God is at hand to congregations living in pluralistic societies. As with any study, there are limitations as to how extensive the research can be. Therefore, pursuit of the following areas of study could be valuable for researchers and students who wish to build upon the present research or to explore similar questions.

First, this research study revealed that a key component in proclaiming the kingship of Jesus is repentance. Related to this, the literature surfaced a connection between repentance and the wilderness experience of God's Old Testament people. Lane suggests the biblical concept of repentance is "deeply rooted in the wilderness tradition."<sup>573</sup> Kohls says something similar.<sup>574</sup> Given the role of the wilderness in the Bible, further research may benefit pastors and churches who desire to faithfully call God's people, who are "elect exiles"<sup>575</sup> and "sojourners and exiles"<sup>576</sup> among the pagan nations of the earth, to repent and believe in the gospel of the kingship of Jesus, especially considering the fact that "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ."<sup>577</sup> The extent to which repentance forms a key component of Jesus's kingdom may shed light on the challenges the present research has uncovered.

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<sup>573</sup> Lane, *Mark*, 2:49.

<sup>574</sup> Kohls, "The Gospel Begins in the Wilderness."

<sup>575</sup> 1 Pet. 1:1.

<sup>576</sup> 1 Pet. 2:11.

<sup>577</sup> Rev. 11:15.

Second, the concept of what one pastor called “kingdom-minded prayers” emerged during the interviews. Another pastor shared that the “number one thing” influencing his congregation’s understanding that the kingdom of God is at hand is their liturgy. The church could benefit from further research into the role of liturgy in theologically shaping a congregation’s understanding of the kingship of Jesus. How might prayers and other liturgical elements be useful to shape an understanding of Jesus’s kingship and instruct his people in faithful living? Given the increasing challenge of pluralism, could liturgy help form a community immune to secular scorn, willing, like Moses, to bear “the reproach of Christ” while “looking to the reward”?<sup>578</sup>

Third, during the interviews, one pastor shared that the greatest distraction to the gospel in America is political partisanship. Considering that proclaiming the gospel of the kingship of Jesus is, in part, a call to forsake all other allegiances, the kingship of Jesus offers a unifying message for the church in a politically polarized culture. An exploration into the idea of allegiance might bear fruit in this context. To what extent must a Christian self-consciously recognize that his or her first allegiance is to King Jesus and only secondarily to his or her nation? How far can a Christian’s “citizenship” in heaven<sup>579</sup> be pressed into action to forestall political divisions within the church? Ought pastors to expect that those who have been called out of the world into “a kingdom that cannot be shaken”<sup>580</sup> set aside partisanship for the greater unity of belonging to Christ? Further

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<sup>578</sup> Heb. 11:26.

<sup>579</sup> Phil. 3:20.

<sup>580</sup> Heb. 12:28.

research on the role of proclaiming the kingship of Jesus as a unifying message in a politically polarized culture may benefit pastors and the church.

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